

Western Desert

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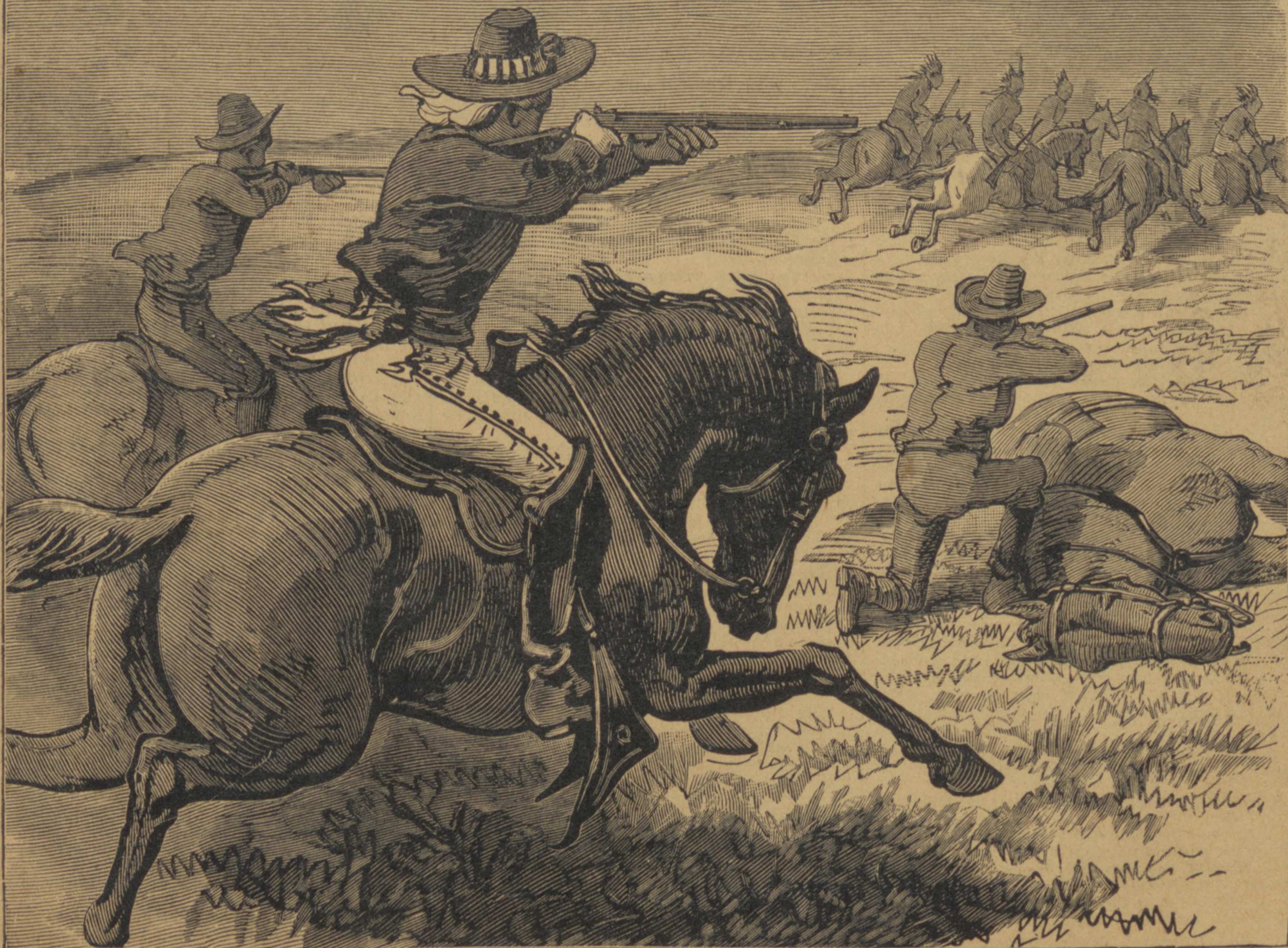
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COWBOY CHRIS, THE DESERT CENTAUR

BY WM. WEST WILDER.



"WHAT A RIP-SNORTIN' OLE PICNIC!" BELLOWED ROUND-UP RUBE.

Cowboy Chris, THE DESERT CENTAUR;

OR,

Hawking for the Human Hawk.

A Story of the Arid Plains.

BY WM. WEST WILDER,

("WYOMING WILL")

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CHAPTER I.

FRIENDS IN NEED.

"HOLY smoke!"

"What do you make of it, Pard Rube?"

"A race fer life, ur I'm er truth-twistin' ole sarnip!"

"I can't make out much of anything except two small clouds of dust, the one in advance being smaller than the other—in fact, it is so small I can scarcely see it at all."

"Thar's one ur two critters on hossback thar, jest humpin' fer dear life. Two ter one, ther ones as is follerin' 'em is 'Paches. I sh'd say thar wuz erbout er dozen o' ther p'ison imps. Ef we c'd jest git inter them dirty varmints, we'd make ther fur fly, Christopher!"

"We must take a hand some way, old man! It is our duty to aid the weaker party, if it is as you surmise."

"An' I reckon it's our duty ter send as menny 'Paches as we kin ter ther happy huntin'-grouns. We'll be doin' ther kentry er mighty big favor. 'Paches an' rattlesnakes is jist one an' the same."

"Then come on!"

"Easy, Pard! Hold hard an' stiddy fer er leetle. They're comin' closter all ther time, an' w'en they sees this knob o' timber, they'll be purty sure ter head fer it. Ef we lay low, we kin guv ther red skunks er mighty s'prise party. Never go off at hafe-cock, Chris, lad."

The individual who volunteered this advice was a small, sharp faced old man, who looked as if he had seen a great deal of the rough side of life. His face was beardless, his eyes keen and piercing. He was dressed like a cowboy, wearing stout high boots, deerskin leggings and hunting shirt, plain "Stinson" sombrero, the latter being encircled by a band thrust full of cartridges. The belt around his waist supported a pair of holstered revolvers, and the haft of a large knife arose from the sheath which hid the bright blade. Grasped by his sinewy hands, a handsome Winchester repeating rifle lay across the saddle-bow in front of him.

The man was the *beau ideal* of a rough and ready cowboy, such a person as would make an excellent friend and a very unpleasant enemy.

His horse was a fine dark-bay animal.

The man's true name was Reuben Randall, but he was more often known as Round-up Rube.

But it was the old cow-puncher's companion who would be sure to attract the most attention in a crowd. Although scarcely of age, he was tall, square-shouldered, finely-built and had the appearance of a perfect *man*, being one of those persons most women naturally regard with admiration. His face was frank and open, his lips being shaded by a brown mustache that added to his good looks, although it was not fully developed. A mass of curling brown hair fell upon his shoulders.

The young man was more fancifully attired than his keen-eyed comrade. His light-colored sombrero was encircled by a gold cord, and his black velvet jacket was cut after the Mexican fashion. A black scarf was knotted sailor fashion under the rolling collar of his white silk shirt. Instead of a belt to support his weapons, he wore a sash of silk webbing around his waist. His grayish pantaloons were thrust into the tops of high boots, which were silver-spurred.

His weapons were similar to those carried by Round-up Rube.

This was Christopher Comstock, or Cowboy Chris, a name given him by his comrades while he was Old Rube's pupil in obtaining a knowledge of the life cattlemen lead.

Scarcely less noticeable than the man was the steed he bestrode. It was a most magnificent animal, coal-black in color, clean-limbed as a deer, and having a proudly arching neck. Like a black waterfall its tail swept rearward. In

its large eyes was a gleam which seemed to denote almost human intelligence and a consciousness of uncommon physical power and beauty. Although in repose, the black steed was constantly on the alert to obey the will of its master, seeming proud of the human burden on its back.

"See, Rube!" exclaimed the young cowboy, as his horse impatiently struck the ground with one forward foot; "Black Cloud is eager to be away."

"Hold him stiddy, Chris! Look thar! Thar bain't but one critter as is runnin' from ther reds; you kin see him now. Thar! He's turnin' fer this yere knot o' timber! All we've got ter do's git under kiver an' help him wipe out ther varmints w'en they come whoopin' up fer his skelp, cuss 'em!"

"If his horse holds out to reach this spot. He is hard pressed."

"Right ye are, lad. But, w'y don't he use his guns?"

Away out on the barren plain the dust-clouds were sweeping toward the little timber island, and now the two cowboys could faintly hear the yells of the pursuing savages—triumphant yells, which indicated their faith in ultimately securing the scalp of the one they were pursuing.

Chris and Rube could now see the figures of the pursued and his pursuers.

"Jest as I 'lowed," nodded the old man. "They're 'Paches. Can't ye ketch ther glitter o' ther lances, lad?"

"I can see something glistening in the sunlight."

"Thet's them. Ther critters hev tuck ter ther white man's gun, but some o' 'em still hang ter ther lances they hed afore they ever saw er gun. Ha! Thet's biz!"

Neither of the cowboys had seen the puff of smoke, which had probably been hidden by the dust-cloud, but the report of a rifle now came faintly to their ears.

"Git back inter ther timber, lad," commanded Rube, setting the example. "I know we're purty well kivered, but them red-skins hev powerful keen eyes, so git back still fuder."

They moved back till a mass of foliage quite concealed the horses. With the barrels of their rifles they made an opening in the leaves and vines sufficient to allow them to watch the race for life.

Having discovered the intention of the white man to seek refuge in the timber, the Indians were urging their tough ponies to the utmost, yelling like fiends unloosed.

The horse ridden by the pursued was nearly used up, and the savages were gaining fast.

"They will overtake him before he can reach cover!" cried Chris.

"Not ef ther boss holds out," assured Rube. "We'll open on ther red ribs ez soon ez they git within long shot."

As the fugitive came nearer they saw he was a man well advanced in years, evidently a plainsman or prospector.

Suddenly the pursued half-turned in the saddle, flinging his rifle to his shoulder. With the motion, every savage disappeared behind the neck and mane of his pony. The rifle of the fleeing man spoke, and one of the sturdy little horses went down, its rider landing nimbly on his feet.

"Good shootin', by Moses!" exclaimed Round-up Rube, admiringly.

Several of the Indians returned the fire, but the fugitive did not appear touched.

"Luck is with him!" burst from Chris Comstock's lips. "But his horse—Rube, look at his horse!"

The overdriven animal was staggering like a drunken thing, and it was plain the creature could not keep on its feet another minute.

The yells of the savages now became demoniac in their fierce triumph. They were near enough for the two friends to see they were Apaches in war-paint and regalia—the very personification of human devils.

"He'll never git ter ther timber, lad," came grimly from the old cow-puncher's lips. "Hole hard thar!" he quickly added, as Chris seemed on the point of giving the noble black free rein.

"We've got ter take them varmints by s'prise, else our skelps'll dry in ther smoke o' a 'Pache wigwam! We want ter bu'st on 'em like er cyclone. Ef ther galoot's hoss goes down, ther fu'st thing ther red pimps'll do 'ill be ter git atween him an' this yere timber. Then'll be our time! Wait tell—Down they go!"

The rider of the exhausted horse had been expecting the worst, and so he was ready for the fall. When the animal went down, its master's feet were free of the stirrups, and he landed safely. Blood had burst from the doomed horse's

nostrils, and, without a struggle, it stretched itself on its side to die.

The fugitive did not give the poor creature a second look. He had no time for that, as there was life and death work on hand for him. Fully believing he was doomed, he determined to fight to the last gasp, brave heart that he was.

Dropping behind the horse, the man began working his rifle in a manner which indicated he had "been there before." The rattling reports of the weapon announced the hail-storm of lead he sent hurtling about the reds.

The Indians had craftily taken refuge behind their ponies, and began to circle the moment the man fell, but, for all of that, he dropped three of the horses and sent the masters of two of them to earth to rise no more. Then the warriors swept around and placed themselves between the desperate man and his only hope of salvation, the timber!

"Reddy fer biz, pard!" hissed the hatchet-faced cowboy. "Pick yer meat an' shoot ter kill! Foller me w'en I guv ther yell. Ready! Let 'er went!"

At the command they opened fire on the Apaches, dropping two of the red wretches with their first shots.

"Now at 'em!"

With a ringing yell, the cowboy pards charged from the timber, still working their repeaters as they appeared in view. Side by side they burst from cover, sending a perfect stream of bullets among the astounded savages.

"Guv 'em belly-lulyer!" howled Old Rube.

With the bridle-rein lying loosely on its neck, the black horse carried its master onward, and Cowboy Chris sat the saddle like one born there. Fire flashed in the eyes of man and beast, and death rained from the speaking muzzle of the young cattleman's rifle. If ever human being deserved the name of Centaur it was Chris Comstock at that moment!

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER OLD NOMAD.

THE Apaches were surprised, but with the readiness of instinct, they shielded themselves behind their ponies and fled from the new danger. Being so suddenly attacked from a new point, they had no time to look after their dead and wounded, but were obliged to leave them where they fell.

Besides knocking a red-skin out of the saddle, Old Rube had dropped a pony that shielded another. From behind the fallen animal its dusky master tried to put a bullet through one of the two cowboys; but Chris saw the danger, a savage eye gleaming along a rifle-barrel, and with a quick shot, stretched a dead Apache beside a dying horse.

The old fellow who had been run down by the Indians gave utterance to a wild yell of delight, rose to one knee, then worked his rifle faster than before, making it plain he had found time to re-fill the magazine. The bullets he sent whistling after the savages must have accelerated their speed, although they seemed to do no harm to the human tigers.

Although Round-up Rube was finely mounted, Chris Comstock's noble black horse carried the young man to the fore. With its head high in the air, its glossy black coat gleaming in the sunlight, its eyes blazing and nostrils dilated, it was the perfect picture of a war-horse.

So firm, easy and natural did the master of the black steed sit in the saddle, every move of the animal seeming at command of his will, man and horse seemed almost as one.

"Holy heavens ter Betsey?" bellowed Round-up Rube, with wild delight. "W'at a rip-snortin' ole picnic! Look sharp, Pard Chris! ther red skunks are beginnin' ter sling lead. Lay down—low down!"

The Indians were indeed returning the fire of their white foes, but, although the bullets whistled about his ears, Chris did not follow the old cowboy's example and bend low in the saddle. Erect he sat, using his rifle till the magazine was empty, and, although bullets whistled about his head, he remained untouched, as if his life was charmed.

Seeing the savages in full flight, Rube Randall swung his rifle at his back, its place in his hands being taken by a rawhide lasso. In less than a minute he had roped one of the dead Indians' ponies, having given a yell which told the younger cowboy the chase was off.

As Chris turned back, he saw the cattleman securing the pony.

The stranger who had been run down by the savages arose to his feet and began reloading his weapons, laughing all the while as if he had never enjoyed himself better in all his life.

The two cowboys approached the old fellow, Rube leading the pony.

"He! he! he!" snickered the old customer, who was a tall, angular individual with two very long legs and a very short body, a peculiarity which made Rube mutter that he was "split purt' nigh ter ther neck."

"Great wobble-j'inted Maria, ther gentle maid o' ther furmatress waterfall!" cried the stranger. "Thet's w'at I calls a large, large time! I did begin ter wish I wuz bald-headed arter they got atwixt me an' tall timber, but I made up my mine I'd inoculate two ur three o' ther sun-stained sinners with a double-distilled decoction o' lead afore they lifted ther frizzes thet adorn my classic cokernut. It's excrews-shiatingly fortinate you fellers chipped in jest as ye did. Ef ye hedn't—good-by, Daniel!"

"I reckon 'twuz kind o' lucky we wuz 'roun'," agreed Rube. "You'd bin swallerin' some o' yer own innoctulation afore long, ef we hedn't 'peared."

"Right, pard, right! I wuz tryin' ter think o' some pray-words ter use. I tell you, I'm jest mighty glad ter see you fillers—I jest bel Shakes!"

As the strange old chap gripped their hands, his homely face puckered up in a comical grin, Rube inquired:

"Who be ye, ole posey?"

"Thar!" cried the queer old man; "then you hit it plumb center fu'st crack! I'm er posy blossom o' ther plains, er fragrant flower o' ther forest, er magenter rose o' ther mountains—oh, I'm er tulip! Don't I look sweet! don't I smell salubrious! Cast yer eyes on me, then—faint! I'm ther fairest blush rose in all this yere great flower-bed o' Arizony! Get onter my blush!"

With a queer twinkle in his sharp eyes, Rube asserted:

"Ter me ye look more like ther las' rose o' summer."

"Thet wuz ther unkindest cut o' all!" sighed the old fellow, but with his eyes full of laughter. "How could you so harshly express yerself—wobble-j'inted Maria! how c'u'd ye?"

"Beg pardon ef I tetched er soft spot."

"Oh, it's all right! You hain't no beauty yerself, if I may speak so plain. Dan Pike hain't kickin'."

"So Dan Pike is yer name?"

"It is, but I'm oftenest called Ole Blossom."

"Then Ole Blossom it shall be. This yere's my pard, Chris Comstock, as white er boy as ever drowed breath. I'm Rube Randall, ur Round-up Rube. We're cowboys."

"Waal, 'low me ter say oncet more thet I'm jest scrumpshus glad ter see ye. My hoss is gone—"

"An' fer thet reason I roped this Injun cayuse. He's yourn, ef ye kin ride ther pesky critter."

"Many, many thanks, Reuben! This is a kindness I shell endeavor to remember—yes, I shell! My pore ole Flyfoot has done his las' flyin'. He wuz er good ole hoss, but his time hed ter come. He hed ter knuckle under, as we all shell w'en our time comes."

With a sudden change of feeling Old Blossom wiped a tear from his eye.

"Tain't no use weepin'," he added. "It can't be helped now. I tell ye, pards, I'm powerful thankful ter git off with my top-knot, an' I thank ye fer takin' er han'. It wuz er galorous sight fer see ye come whoopin' outer ther timber, a-sockin' hot lead ter ther imps! Ef I c'u'd jest wash some o' ther crust o' dirt offen me, I'd look er leetle more like ther flower I reppry-sent."

"Thar's er spring in ther grove."

"Then I 'low I'll go hev er swaller an' git clean. Kem on, hoss!"

Leading the pony, he made his way toward the grove, while Rube and Chris looked after the fallen red-skins, making sure they were beyond doing further harm, and confiscating or destroying their weapons.

"We don't want ter leave ther tools fer their pards ter use," admonished Rube. "Ef 'tadn't bin fer ther derved fool agents, ther red whelps'd never bin hafe so bad ter handle, fer they'd never got so menny shooters."

When this task was attended to they moved toward the little grove, to be met on the outskirts by Old Blossom, whose appearance had been much improved by a liberal application of water to his face and hands.

"I tell ye I feel better!" he nodded. "But, look out thar, pards! Ther red rapsallions hev pulled up, an' are keepin' an eye on us."

It was true the Apaches had halted far out on the plain.

"They are waiting for us to depart," said

Chris. "Then they will come and look after their dead comrades."

"Did ye skelp ther varmints?" asked Pike.

"No; we are not scalp-hunters."

"Waal, I dunno's I keer fer their ha'r, though it'd only be sarvin' 'em as they w'u'd us ef they hed ther chance. But I'm outer ther far business."

After a short discussion, it was decided to move on, leaving the dead reds for their comrades to look after. Old Blossom having secured his saddle, adjusted it to the back of the captured pony, then they were ready to start.

As they rode out from the grove, Rube asked Old Blossom how he came to be in such a scrape, and the old plains tramp explained that, with two comrades, he had been on a prospecting trip in that section. They had been troubled to find water, but had finally struck a small spring and halted in a bit of timber, where they intended to rest through the heat of the day. By the aid of a field-glass, they had espied some antelopes away out on the plain, and Blossom had started out to get a shot at them, keeping himself shielded from view by some low hills.

But he was not destined to taste antelope meat that day.

Before he reached a position from which he intended to stalk the game, he was sighted by a band of Indians and found himself cut off from his friends. A desperate race for life followed, during which Pike was driven out upon the barren plain. Our friends had seen the termination of the race.

"I dunno whether ther red imps wuz follerin' us an' knowed thar wuz more'n one ur not," he concluded. "Anyhow, I reckon ther hull party tuck arter me. Pardan an' Con 'll hev ter look out fer their own selves tell we come tergether erg'in."

As Rube and Chris were not very particular which direction they pursued, they allowed Old Blossom to lead the way.

"We'll try ter fine tber other lads," said the old fellow. "They're away yon ter ther west-ward somewhar. I tuck a turn on them red-skins, an' thet's w'at brought us in frum ther norrud. By ther great wobble-j'inted Maria! you kin gamble thet I don't keer 'bout takin' 'nother sech er race under this yere scorchin' sun—I jest don't!"

"Were you an' yer pards prospectin' fer gold?" ventured Rube.

A queer look passed over Old Blossom's face, but he nodded promptly:

"Yep."

"Waal, you wuz in er rayther strange part o' ther Territory, fer I've never heerd o' any great gold diskiverys bein' made up in this section. 'Most all ther yaller seems ter be down on ther Salt an' Gila, ur tharabouts."

Dan Pike did not seem very communicative as to their reasons for having wandered so far from the regular stamping-grounds of the gold-hunters, and so Randall did not press him.

For half a dozen miles they rode onward, conversing on general topics. Finally Old Blossom turned in the saddle and looked back. Then he uttered an exclamation:

"Great splutterin' ham-fat thet stewed ther sassage fer ole Noah!" he snorted. "Jest look back thar, pards!"

"Ther pesky 'Paches are follerin' us!" asserted Round-up Rube, after wheeling in the saddle and taking a long survey.

CHAPTER III.

A DESERT MIRAGE.

FAR back on the plain between them and the little knob of timber, they could discern several moving figures.

"Are you sure they are Apaches?" asked Chris.

"Great wobble-j'inted Maria, yes!" exclaimed Blossom. "Them are ther o'nery, pestiferous, diabolical, consarned sweet-scented copper-skins o' Arizony—yes, they be! Them are most likely ther same infarnal skunks thet 'scaped slaughter back thar, an' now they are arter us fer blood—deep-red blood! They mean ter hev satisfaction fer ther way we used ther chums, an' so they are goin' ter foller us tell er good chance comes. Oh, they're ther meanest, most vengeful, dad-derved coyotes in— Whoa, thar! Now w'at's ther matter with you? Whoa, bless ye—whoa!"

The pony which the old man rode suddenly began to act contrary, bucking, squealing and biting viciously at Dan's legs.

"I knowed it!" laughed Round-up Rube. "Ther only thing thet struck me wuz how ther

critter kem ter let ye putt on ther saddle so easy. It must be he hes hed a saddle on his back afore this, ur else he w'u'dn't.* Them cayuses don't seem ter like er white man any more then ther masters do, an' it's er derved wonder he 'lowed ye ter straddle him arter ye got ther saddle on."

"Waal, I'll ride him now—whoa, dern ye!—ur bu'st my b'iler tryin'! He'll fine lots o' sport tryin' ter dislodge this yere ole por'us plaster frum his back—he jest will! I'll stick tighter then tar—whoa, I say!—ter er nigger's beell No, ye can't do it, dast ye!"

Plainly Old Dan was an expert horseman, despite his long legs and awkward appearance, for the ugly little beast found it impossible to dislodge him, and finally gave up the attempt in apparent disgust.

"Hed heaps an' hops an' humps o' fun, didn't ye!" sneered the long-legged Nomad, when the pony had grown quieter. "Tried ter play circus an' use me fer ther clown, didn't ye! Thought I wuz er rubber ball thet's easy bounced, didn't ye! Waal, ye foun' I sticks wuss then er burrin er muel's tail, didn't ye! Oh-ar-r-rrr!"

With the exclamation, he sawed so savagely at the rotten rope-bridle the pony's former master had used that the rope broke as if it were tow.

Chris Comstock had been looking for something of the kind to occur, and he had made preparations by getting his lasso in hand.

The moment the pony discovered what had happened it struck out for itself. In an instant Chris was after the runaway, his lariat circling around his head.

Uttering a cry of warning to Old Blossom, he made the cast.

The throw was made with a precision that showed Round-up Rube had good reasons for being proud of his pupil; but Old Blossom had not understood or did not heed the warning, for when the shock came, the prospector went flying over the pony's head, his long arms and legs outstretched in such a manner that he looked like a huge frog. He uttered a wild yell as he flew through the air and a terrific grunt when he struck the ground.

As the young cowboy made haste to secure the pony, the old fellow who had so hurriedly and unintentionally dismounted sat up and looked around.

"By the jaw-bone with which ole Samson slewed the Philistines!" he murmured; "But thet wuz a reg'lar s'prise-party—it jest wuz!"

"Are ye hurt, pard?" asked Rube.

"I reckon not much," was the slow reply, while a queer grin overspread the rugged face.

"But, great wobble-j'inted Maria! thet wuz suthin' not laid down onter the programmy! I hain't uster taking boerial trips; I hain't made no plans ter go huntin' fer comets; I hain't got no relatives in ther moon that I knows about. Ef you fellers hed jest ez lief, I'll remain on ther ole yearth er while longer—yes, I will!"

"I gave you fair warning," laughed Chris.

"I heard ye, young feller—I heard ye yoop, but I didn't understan'."

"I am very sorry—" the young cowboy began; but Old Blossom interrupted him with a wave of his hand.

"It's all right, lad! I don't mine er leetle thing like thet. Thet ain't nothin' a tall compared with w'at I hev bin through. I hev bin run over by railroad trains, blowed up in powder mills, blowed up by cyclones an' blowed up by crab-apple tempered ole maids! I hev been wrecked by a yearthquake, passed through a railroad wreck, an' bin shipwrecked! Thet's w'y I'm so reckless. Still I exist! Do you think a little thing like this is of any consequence?"

With a comical expression of extreme disgust at so trivial an affair, the queer old chap arose to his feet, picking up his rifle.

"But now," he added, "ther next thing is ter make er nother harness fer this pesky critter, an' one thet will hold."

From his own lariat he cut sufficient rope for the purpose, and a duplicate of the simple head-stall was soon adjusted to the pony's head, though the ugly little brute showed its viciousness by snapping with its white teeth at the old man.

In a short time they were ready to move onward again.

"Ther red skunks are considerable nigher," observed Rube, after once more regarding their pursuers.

This was evident to the trio.

"Ther red imps will never give over ther

*The Apaches, "the Red Bedouins of the plains," often ride without either saddle or bridle.

trail now tell they are tricked er killed," asserted Old Blossom.

"An' it's mighty hard ter kill er 'Pache' 'less ye kin pump ther lead inter a vital spot fu'st jump."

"An' it's harder ter trick 'em."

"We will have to dodge them under cover of darkness," Chris observed.

"Thar won't be none," declared Rube. "Et'll be er clear moonlight night."

Upon second thought, Chris knew this was true.

"Then we will have to turn back and wipe them out!"

"Easier said than done. They hev hed enough fightin' ter last 'em er bit. They'd run fer it, but ther minute we turned, they'd turn too, an' then more doggin' w'u'd foller. We've got ter keep our eyes peeled ef we don't want ter lose our skelps."

As they rode onward, they continued to discuss the situation.

Suddenly a cry of amazement burst from Chris Comstock's lips:

"Look there!"

His companions followed the direction of his pointing hand, and an astonishing sight met their gaze.

Away ahead of them seemed to stretch a vast expanse of water, a lake of magnificent area, an inland sea of which the further shore was invisible! The water seemed blue as the clearest skies, and, although the sun was pouring its scorching rays on their heads, it appeared as if they must feel a cool breeze from the bosom of the great lake.

But what was most astonishing was the fact that upon the shore of the lake nearest at hand the wreck of a ship seemed to rest where it had been driven on the sand by wind and wave!

At a glance, the three men saw that the ship looked strange. Although battered and dismantled, its masts carried away, it still preserved its general original outline. But it was quite unlike the ships of the present day, being built after the model of the old Spanish cruisers in use when America was discovered.

"It's ther Phantom Ship!"

Old Blossom uttered the cry, and he seemed more excited than his companions.

"The Phantom Ship?" repeated Chris, questioningly.

"Thet's w'at it is, by ther great wobble-j'inted Maria!"

"But ther water!" exclaimed Rube. "Thet can't be thar? Thet's only one o' them yere optican delusions!"

"Ther ship hain't thar nuther," sighed Old Dan, regretfully. "Ef it wuz, our everlastin' fortunes w'u'd be made!"

"How so?"

"What do you mean?"

"Jest w'at I said."

"But we don't understan'."

"It's plain you fellers hain't never heerd o' ther Phantom Ship?"

Both the cowboys confessed they had not.

"It's one o' ther mysteries o' Arizona. Seel it's fadin'!"

The outlines of the wrecked ship were really becoming more indistinct.

Round-up Rube happened to glance back over his shoulder, and another cry came from his lips.

"Holy smoke!"

He had made the discovery that the pursuing Apaches had turned back and were fleeing as if hotly chased by a legion of demons.

"Hal hal hal! he! he! he!" laughed Old Pike. "They hev seen ther Phantom Ship, too! Ther red varmints are skeered ter death o' it."

"Can that be the reason for their flight?" asked Chris.

"Thet's jest w'at it is," nodded the Nomad.

"They can't understan' ther 'pearance an' disappearance o' ther ship, an' they think ther Evil One is at ther bottom o' it. Darned ef I know but he is!" he added, after a moment's pause.

"Well, this is an easy way to get rid of them."

"You are right, fer they won't foller us no furder."

"Then good-by ter them," laughed Round-up Rube. "Menny thanks ter ther Phantom Ship, as ye calls it."

When they turned back to look at the ship, it had vanished! The lake was also gone, and the plain stretched barren and desolate before them!

"Thet's ther way!" sighed Old Blossom—thet's ther way it comes, an' thet's ther way it goes. No man has ever been able ter reach it yit."

"It was only a mirage," explained Chris.

"But ther 'riginal is somewhar," asserted Dan, firmly. "An' thet somewhar is up in this yere part o' ther Territory."

"What makes you think so?"

"Up roun' this yere way is all the place whar ther Phantom is seen."

"And the original of the ship, if there is an original in existence, may be thousands of miles away on the coast. The mirage showed us both the ship and the water. I have heard of whole cities appearing in the desert where nothing but cacti and sage-brush could exist."

Rube ventured to ask:

"W'at did ye mean by sayin' our everlastin' fortunes w'u'd be made ef ther ship wuz thar?"

Blossom hesitated a moment, then replied:

"It's plain I'll hev ter tell ye w'at some people b'lieve 'bout ther Phantom. It is said this yere part o' Arizony wuz once er great inland sea. Thet wuz in ther time w'en ther Spaniards under ole Cortez made ther conquest o' Mexico an' wuz ther ruin o' Montezuma. Ther Spaniards loaded their ships with gold an' silver, an' meny o' 'em wuz wrecked with all their treasure. Some folks think this yere Phantom is one o' them ships, an' ef ther 'riginal wuz foun', it w'u'd be diskivered loaded with treasure. Thet's ther hull o' it at er bite."

"An' thet only shows w'at fools some folks kin be," came contemptuously from Rube.

"How c'u'd thet ship git 'way inland hyer?"

"Some think thar may hev bin er way fer it to hev sailed up frum ther Gulf, mebbe 'long ther Colorado somehow. Some think it may hev bin built ter navvygate ther great inland sea."

"Waal, I reckon they're all crack-brains!"

"Mebbe so," confessed Dan, soberly. "Anyhow, it's a curi's thing thet w'en er man gits ter chasin' arter ther Phantom it's wuss then ther gold-fever. He never knows w'en ter stop, an' it's said lots o' good men hev died in ther desert fer want o' water, hevin' bin lured on an' on by ther Phantom. Thar wuz one man, Texas Burk, as swore with dyin' breath thet he hed foun' ther ship itself an' seen ther treasure it contained."

"Who heard him say so?"

"I did."

"An' he wuz dyin'?"

"Yep."

"Waal, he must hev bin crazy."

"He didn't 'pear so."

"Did you take any stock in the yarn?"

"I dunno as I sh'u'd," deliberately, "but, 'mongst stuff he brought out o' ther desert wuz er dish o' solid gold, an' thet he swore he tuck from ther ship. He seemed hones' then an' in his right mind, though he wuz wild afore he died, an' raved o' ther ship an' its treasure long as he c'u'd speak."

Rube shook his head.

"Either he wuz crazy all ther time ur he wuz fooled somehow."

Chris joined in this belief, and Old Dan made no attempt to argue the matter, so the subject was dropped, and once more they proceeded, heading toward some low hills which could be seen lying well down along the horizon.

CHAPTER IV.

BROTHERS.

SUNSET found the three friends within the hills, which were rather barren, being but scantily timbered. Water was difficult to find, so they pushed forward, even after night had fallen.

Suddenly Old Dan Pike's keen eyes detected a glimmer of light.

"Great ham-fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" he softly exclaimed. "Thet is er camp-fire down thar in ther valley! Mebbe it's Pardan an' Con!"

"Mebbe it's critters we don't keer anythin' 'bout secin'." Round-up Rube supplemented.

"Kirect, me noble sir," the old Nomad agreed. "Fer thet reason, one o' us better sneak down an' inspec'. Who's ther one fer ther juty?"

After a moment's discussion, Rube was selected.

Had it not been for the deep shadows, Old Blossom would have seen that the veteran cowboy was wonderfully bow-legged, a fact which became apparent whenever he left the saddle. Leaving his horse in charge of Chris, Randall skulked away toward the point where the fire had gleamed out, his rifle ready for instant use.

He was not gone long.

"I reckon it's all right," he declared, when he returned. "Thar's only three, an' they're all white, one bein' er purty leetle gal, 'nother an ole man, an' ther third er fat boy thet talks like he wuz er Dutchman. They're travelin' with er army waggon an' muels. They've struck er spring down thar."

It was at once decided to boldly advance.

Before they came in full view of the camp the sudden sound of soft music and girlish laughter came to their ears. Then a voice was lifted in a rollicking song to the accompaniment of a guitar:

"Von dimes I vent to see mein girls,
All dressed so very fine;
She vas a leedle darling, und
Her shoes vas number nine.
She blushed mitoudt some bainting,
She filled mein heart mit woe,
She met me at der door und say:
'I haf anodder beau!'

"Oh, yaw, dot is shoost v'at she say,
Und den she invite me to skip;
I asked might I call der next day,
Sne gave me von biece uf her lip.

"I haf no more some use vor you;
Dose vords I heart her speak;
To helb me oudt she calt der tog,
Und den I took a sneak.
Der tog he dore my bants so pad
Id made von awful show;
Dot girls she only laugh und say:
'I haf anodder beau!'

"Oh, yaw, dot is shoost v'at she say,
Und den she invite me to skip;
I asked might I call der next day,
She gave me von biece uf her lip.

"Und you can shoost pets you your poots I haf nod peen to see dot grewel girls some more, I pelieve! I runs meinseluf away und comes out Vest to exderminate der ret-skins, but I haf nod peen able to find any uf dose savages. I subbose dey must haf heart uf me und run away und hides somevares."

The speaker was a round, jolly-faced Dutch lad, who looked as if he would "roll one way as quick as the other."

The two cowboys and Old Blossom had advanced into plain view of the camp and halted to listen to the song.

The firelight revealed a pleasant scene. The old army wagon and the feeding mules were in the background. Stretched at full length, a black pipe in his mouth and his head pillowed on a gunnysack "grub-bag," was a man past middle age. Not far from his side a pretty girl of seventeen was seated on a box, the guitar in her hands. The fat Dutch boy was seated on the ground.

So preoccupied were the three that they did not notice the strangers who had ventured from the shadows and halted within the circle of light.

"You must be a very brave fellow, Roly, laughed the girl. "If some Indians should appear at this minute, what would you do?"

"Mein cootness cracious! I shoost vish dwo ur dree uf dose Injuneses vould come along so I could show you der stoof dot I vas made uf. Vor your bright eyes, Leedle Pess, I coot lick more as sigsdeen billions uf dem! I vould nod efen stob to git mein gun, but I vould vade into dem sinkle-hanted und knock uf dem der pack-in's oudt!"

At this, Round-up Rube gave a hoarse "haw, haw" of amusement, causing the fat lad to scramble to his feet in a wonderfully awkward manner.

"Dunder und blitzens!" he squawked. "Injuneses! Injuneses! Run vor your lifes!"

He started for the wagon, stubbed his toe and rolled over and over in the short grass, squealing in a most ridiculous manner.

"I vill took id all pack, goot Mister Injuneses! I nefer meant nottings ad all, so helup me shiminy cracious! I vas shoost voolin' all der dimes! Ach, himmel! I vas kilt entirely!"

Seizing a rifle the old man sprung to his feet, leveling the weapon at the three intruders, crying sternly:

"Halt thar, you critters! Who be ye, an' w'at d'yer want?"

The girl had also leaped to her feet, but even the probability of danger could not check her laughter at the ridiculous figure cut by the fat Dutch lad.

"We are friends," declared Cowboy Chris.

"Great wobble-j'inted Maria, yes!" added Old Blossom, who was also convulsed by the comical fright of the Dutch boy. "Ham-fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah! I hain't seen northin' so funny as this yere sence ther s'prise party on ther 'Paches! Ho! ho! ho! he! he! he!"

"Who are you?" again demanded the old man.

"White men and friends," replied Chris Comstock, suppressing his mirth for the time.

"Vot's dot?" exclaimed the Dutch boy, suddenly sitting up and staring hard at the intruders. "Shiminy dunder!"

Having discovered the mistake he had made, he added:

"Vell, you can pets you your lifes dot vas lucky vor you! If you hat some Injunes peen, in apoudt dwo minutes you would haf peen doo deat to skin alretty. Yaw, dot vas apoud der sizes uf dot cases."

With this declaration, he scrambled to his feet and stood staring hard at the three strangers, making a ludicrous attempt to look very ugly.

"Mebbe I believe you t'inks dot vas fun! Vell, dere vas held some diff'rent kints of opinionses apoud dot peesness. Shoost you vellers took von look mein eye in und see if you don'd t'ink dot vas some very pad mistakes v'at you make v'en you come around in dot vashion. Berhabs you don'd know who I vas? Vell, I am some second cousins to der veller v'at dey calls Sbon Sullimans, und I haf got von muscles pigger as a der squash v'at dakes der brize at der fair. Dot's der kint uf er hair-pins I vas!"

"Roly!" cried the old man.

"Yaw."

"You talk er derved sight too much."

"Dot vas because mein mout' vas puilt dot vay."

"Wal, you jest putt on ther brakes an' let me chin er bit. I want ter find out who these people be."

"All rict. I vas tongue-tied like some oysters."

Then the old fellow turned to the three visitors in his camp, demanding:

"How am I ter know you people are frien's?"

"Wobble-j'inted Maria!" snickered Old Blossom. "Jest look inter our beaucherful phizogs an' read ther truth an' honesty written thar in letters of light! C'u'd sech er gallant ole posey as I be anythin' but squar' as er brick? Echo answers: 'Not by er dad burned sight!' Pard, before you ye see er fragrant flower o' ther forest, er panzy blossom o' ther prairie, er blush rose o' ther border. Observe my blush!"

With that the queer old fellow slapped both cheeks in the endeavor to conjure up some color that would resemble a blush.

The man of the camp stared hard at the Desert Nomad, a puzzled look settling on his face.

"If we were not friends," spoke Chris, "why should we venture out here and place ourselves under your gun? Had we been enemies, we might have jumped you before you knew of our presence."

The girl was convinced, and she said:

"I am sure they speak the truth, father. They all look honest."

"Boys," hoarsely whispered Old Blossom, "it's lucky I'm with ye. She's bin lookin' straight at me all ther time."

"W'at are yer names an' yer business, strangers?" asked the one whom the girl had called father.

"Me an' my pard, ther young feller byer, are cowboys," answered Round-up Rube. "We hev strayed offen our regular stampin'-groun' ter look fer anythin' excitin'. His name's Chris Comstock, an' mine's Rube Randall. This other ole chromo is known as Ole Blossom."

"An' he uster be called Dan Pike," added the Nomad.

"W'at!" shouted the camper, in evident amazement. "Dan Pike?"

"Thet's it."

"Not Dan Pike o' Grafton, Mizzury?"

"Thet's whar I r'iginated."

"Wal, I'm Jim Pike."

"W'at's thet?" yelled Old Blossom, his face the picture of astonishment. "Not Jim Pike o' Grafton, Mizzury?"

"Thet's me!"

The next moment the strange old borderman was off the pony's back.

"You derved ole sarnip!" he cried, making a rush for the camper.

"You good-fer-nuthin' runaway!" was the retort, as the other met him half-way.

Then the two became locked in each other's arms.

"I kin throw ye now, Jim!" triumphantly declared Old Blossom.

"You hain't built right, Dan!" was the firm retort.

The others looked on in amazement, unable to understand whether the two were fighting or not.

The struggle was brief and fierce, but in the end Old Blossom went to the ground with his opponent above him. Then Jim Pike arose, extended his hand and helped the vanquished one to his feet.

"It hain't no use, Jim!" laughed Old Blossom in a somewhat crestfallen manner. "I don't reckon I'll ever be able ter down ye. I hain't seen ye afore in twenty year, but I'm derved ef you hain't jest ez chipper with yer heels as ye

uster wuz! But I'll be sizzled, Jim, ef I hain't right glad ter git my ole peepers on ye! Come to me arms again, you time-scarred ole tulip!"

Laughing like overjoyed children, the two old men again embraced. They were brothers who had been separated for a score of years.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT HAPPENED TO LITTLE BESS?

"I THOUGHT thar wuz suthin' familiar 'bout ye, Dan," asserted Old Jim, when the entire party had gathered around the fire, Chris and Rube having cared for the horses while the reunited brothers were coming to an understanding. "Thar seemed suthin' natteral like 'bout yer hombly ole mug.—Dan'l, this is my darter Bessie; Bess, this is yer Uncle Dan I hev tole ye so much about."

The girl greeted the old man in a becoming manner.

"Waal, she's er beauchy, Jim!" exclaimed Old Blossom, as he held the maiden's hand and gazed admiringly into her blushing face. "She's jest erbout ez purty ez they make 'em! But, whar's her mammy?"

A sudden shadow fell on Old Jim's face. Dan saw it, and hastened to say:

"I understan'; she is up thar," pointing upward.

Jim said nothing.

"She is dead?"

"Yes," came solemnly from Jim's lips, "she is dead."

No one heard him add, in an aside:

"Dead to Bess an' me!"

"An' I never saw her," came slowly from Dan's lips. "You were not married w'en I went away, Jim."

They sat down around the fire, and the conversation turned to pleasanter subjects. In a little while Old Blossom began to chaff the Dutch boy about his fright.

"I vos nod frightened," the fat lad asserted, with dignity. "I do dot der fun uf der t'ing vor. Id vas all make-pelief, und I shoost fell ofer mit laughing so much my sleeve in. I vas von gread feller vor dot kindt uf a shokes. Id somedimes mages me so dickled dot I near pu'sts meinseluf vide open mit laughing mein insides on. Yaw, dot vas der straight goots, all-vool-und-a-yart-vide."

"Hans was never known to tell a fib," laughed the girl.

"Nefer!" cried the Dutch boy, "nefer in all mein life dit I tole dot fibs ven I tole der truth. Yaw, dot vas so. I vas very careful nod to tole der bote at der same times. Dot vas von shokes! V'y don'd you laugh, I believe?"

"We don't see the point."

"Vell, you ought to haf some microfyng sbeedacles vor your prains, I t'ink. Ven I mages a coot shokes uf dot kindt, I likes to haf him abbrecciated."

"W'at might yer name be, Waddle?" asked Old Blossom.

"Vell, Clotes-pin, I mighd say id mighd pe Krmblevacher, but id vas nod. Den I mighd try to balm dot chestnuts off vor some odder shokes, but dot is nod der kindt uf a poy I pe. My name vas Hans Krummacker, und dose beebles v'at vas nod admired der elecant outline my figure uf dey calls me Roly Poly Hans."

"Wal, Hans," said Old Jim, "you will shet trap now an' guv some o' ther rest er chance ter chin."

Then, turning to the cowboys and Old Blossom, he asked how they came to be there.

In a short time everything was explained, and then they questioned Old Jim in turn. But the old man succeeded in avoiding making a direct answer, skillfully turning the conversation into other channels.

Chris decided he had a secret.

The young cowboy was very quiet, but once or twice the girl detected him regarding her intently! Instantly her eyes would fall before his gaze, and a blush suffuse her cheeks. To himself Chris acknowledged she was very charming, but his thoughts turned to one he had left away back in the San Juan Valley of Northern New Mexico.

"She is nothing to me now," he thought, somewhat bitterly. "I might have won her had I taken an advantage, but all I asked was an even show. She cared more for Fred than for me, and now they are married."

"But there was Nina—she was as pretty and as accomplished as Nell, and Fred said she cared for me. I did not love her in return. I wonder if we shall ever meet again? I do not believe I shall ever care to return to the old stamping-ground."

After a time his thoughts came back to his

present surroundings, and he fell to watching little Bess again.

"Her father is rough and uncouth," he thought; "but she seems refined and ladylike, and she speaks as if she was the possessor of some education. The old man must have given her the advantage of a school. What can have brought this strange trio away out here into the wilds of Arizona?"

That was a question he was unable to answer. The time passed swiftly and pleasantly, and finally Old Jim called on Bess for some music and a song, a request promptly seconded by the others. Being urged, she played several pieces, some of them being lively and gay, some soft and sad. Each one was received with applause.

"Now guv us er song, leetle 'un," cried Old Blossom.

"What shall I sing?" she asked.

"Sing 'Ther Rovin' Heart'," suggested her father.

But she objected.

"I do not like to sing that."

But Old Jim was determined she should sing the song he had named, and she finally consented. Chris noticed she half turned from him ere she began.

The song was a simple little thing, but she threw such life and expression into its faulty lines that its defects were not noticeable. She really had a charming voice, although not a strong one; but strength was not needed in a soft love song.

The words of the song were as follows:

"As free as the birds, I rove,
As free as the birds I love,
I roam the wide world o'er.
My heart untouched by care,
Shall find its mate somewhere:
Then will it roam no more!

"Then will it roam no more?
Or will it broken be?
And all its dreams be o'er?
Will the heart it loves be free?"

"Oh, my heart will know its mate!
Oh, my heart will know its fate!
And love shall ope' the door.
My eyes shall tell the tale,
My cheeks shall flush and pale,
My heart will roam no more!

"Then will it roam no more?
Or will it broken be?
And all its dreams be o'er?
Will the heart it loves be free?"

The song ceased, and, as if drawn by an irresistible attraction, the fair singer's eyes turned till they were met by those of the young cowboy, who was gazing steadily at her. Then her dark eyelashes drooped, her cheeks took a warmer flush, and with charming confusion, she pretended to busy herself in tuning a string that was already in perfect accord.

And Chris! The young cowboy felt his heart give a great start and then beat faster than before. A strange sensation passed over him like a flash, and every part of his body seemed touched by an electric thrill.

"What can it mean?" he mentally cried. "Can it be I am falling in love with this girl? She is fair, her face is the picture of purity, but it cannot be I would turn to another so soon after meeting with the disappointment of my life! No, no! It is but a fancy of the moment!"

All the same, he dreamed of her repeatedly that night, and all through his dreams that sweet little song was sounding in his ears and her dark eyes were luring him on.

Old Blossom volunteered to stand guard the first part of the night, and was finally permitted to do so.

Jim Pike had chosen his camping-ground well, for the hills and timber promised to keep the spot in shadow the greater part of the night, no matter how bright the moonlight—and Arizona moonlight is almost like daylight!

"I don't reckon we're ap' ter be bothered ter-night," muttered the old Nomad, as he carefully made the rounds of the camp, his eyes wide open and his senses on the alert. "Them red skunks as wuz arter us didn't foller arter seein' ther Phantom Ship, an' it hain't proble any o' ther 'lation is prowlin' roun'."

"Thet thar ship is er mystery, an' thet's a fac! I dunno but it's all foolishness ter hunt fer it, but Pardan an' Con wuz in fer ther venture, an' so I j'ined 'em, as they needed er guide. "But it's derved sing'ler I sh'u'd meet ole Jim hyer arter all these y'ars—it jest is! I wonder w'at kin hev tuck him ter these yere parts? An' ther leetle gal, he brung her right erlong."

Little Bess had entered the wagon, where she slept every night, but her father was wrapped in his blanket a short distance from the fire. Old

Blossom softly approached his brother and stood staring silently down on the sleeping man. Suddenly Jim Pike began to mutter in his dreams.

"Yes, I'll find ther treasure—all fer—Little Bess. It will make—her rich—powerful rich. All the rest—of her life will—be pervided fer. Oh, I'll find ther treasure—ther yaller treasure! They say ther ship is—a Phantom. Ah-ha! I'll foller it—tell I find it—or die! I'll never guv up! Ther gold is thar! Ther Phantom won't—alwus vanish. I'll find it! I'll find it! I'll find—"

Then the sleeper's mutterings sunk to a series of incoherent moans.

Old Blossom had heard enough to know what had brought his brother into the desert, and he softly stole away.

Reaching the tethered horses, he halted.

"Waal," he muttered, "thar's ernoother pore fool as is huntin' fer the Phantom Ship! He's got ther fever, an' he's got it *bad*! It is said ther ship hes lured many er man ter death, an' I reckon thet's Gospel. Jim is a man as ought ter be able ter take keer o' hisself, but it don't seem jest ther right thing ter bring thet purty leetle gal inter ther dangers o' this section."

For a long time he stood reviewing the situation, having quite lost himself in thought. The grinding of the horses' teeth, an occasional stamp, and the distant cry of some prowling animal were all the sounds that came to his ears until—

A sharp feminine shriek, that seemed broken and smothered at the close, aroused him!

"Great ham-fat thet stewed ther sassage o' ole Noah!"

The cry had seemed to come from quite a distance away, but he immediately sprung toward the camp-fire, his first thought being of Little Bess.

He found his four companions all on their feet.

"W'at's ther meanin' o' thet cry?" demanded Round-up Rube.

"It was the young lady!" excitedly exclaimed Chris. "I was dreaming she was in danger! Quick! See what has happened to her!"

Old Jim seized a brand from the fire and swung it in the air till it burst into a flame. Then he leaped forward and threw back the wagon-flap, allowing the light to illumine the interior.

A great cry burst from his lips.

Little Bess was gone!

CHAPTER VI.

BLACK BRAD'S CAPTURE.

"SH! D'ye see it, Ugly?"

"Shore, boss!"

"An' you, Bad-eye?"

"I caught a glimps' of it, Cap."

"Must be er camp-fire down thar in ther holler."

"Yep."

"S'pose it's 'Paches?"

"They don't oftun light up ter tell folks whar they be."

"Then it must be whites."

"I reckon you've hit it now."

The cautious speakers were three men who had halted in such a position that they could look down into the sheltered hollow where Jim Pike had stopped for the night, and where, with the exception of Old Blossom, the entire party was sleeping.

The three men were mounted, and but for the stamping of the horses near which he had halted, the camp-guard might have heard their hoof-beats as they approached the hollow.

One of the three had caught the gleam of the dying camp-fire, and, at a signal, the trio had halted. Then followed the conversation recorded.

The night-riders had halted amid the shadows. Had they been in the moonlight, an observer would have at once taken note of the number of polished weapons belted to the waists of each.

They were all heavily bearded, two of them being anything but prepossessing in appearance. The third was physically a fine-looking man, although he had the air of a ruffian.

They were, in truth, desperadoes of the worst type. The one addressed as "boss" or "Cap" was Brad Hawk—"Black Brad"—an outlaw who made his name a terror in the Territory at one time. He was the Apollo of the three.

Black Brad's companions were two fit associates and tools of such a man. They were known as Ugly Ike and Bad-eye Bob.

"This yere thing's wu'th lookin' into, boss," asserted Ugly Ike.

"Thet's so," nodded the man of the bad eye.

"Mebby we'll strike suthin' down thar thet'll require our 'tention."

"Thet's right, boys," agreed the leader. "They must be whites, fer they can't be any of Two Hosses' gang. We wuz ter hit Two Hosses at ther Twin Wells, an' they're ten miles furdur on."

"Them's whites, you kin 'pend on thet," whispered Ike. "Most likely they're miners. Mebbe they hev made er strike an' are leanin' fer ther camps furdur down."

"In which case its our sollum dooty ter relieve 'em o' their needless wealth," chuckled Bob.

After a moment of consideration, the leader said:

"Bob, you will stay right hyer an' look arter ther hosses w'ile Ike an' I go down thar ter investigate. We can't all three go 'long."

There was no objection to this arrangement, and soon the two men were creeping down toward the sleeping camp.

They were yet some distance away when they reached a position where the sinking firelight revealed to them the outlines of the covered wagon and the sleepers around the fire. There they paused to exchange a few whispered words and wonder where the guard could be.

"I don't see any one on watch, d'you, Ike?"

"Nary soul. Ten ter one, ther blamed fools are all snoozin'. They hain't made no 'count o' any one diskiverin' 'em."

At that moment Old Blossom was with the horses concealed by the darkness, the old man being buried in a deep reverie caused by the words he had heard his brother mutter while sleeping.

"Ha! Look thar, Cap!"

The flap at the end of the wagon was lifted and the form of a girl appeared. It was Little Bess, and she silently left the wagon. Her movements were slow, deliberate and mechanical.

The firelight was sufficient to show the two desperadoes the girl was young and comely, causing the eyes of both men to gleam with an evil light.

There was something odd about the girl's manner, and she moved as if governed by an impulse other than her own will. After reaching the ground, she began moving from the camp.

"Holy Moses!" excitedly whispered Ike. "She's comin' right this way!"

"Keep still!" cautioned Black Brad. "She may be a prize worth capturing. If she gives us the chance, we will scoop her in. Lay low!"

It was little wonder Old Blossom knew nothing of the girl's movements, for she scarcely made a sound as she left the wagon and passed from the circle of firelight into the shadow beyond.

Directly toward the point where the two ruffians crouched she moved, all unconscious of the terrible danger into which she was walking. There was something about the maiden's manner that filled those who were watching her with wonder.

Slowly and deliberately she came on. With as little noise as possible, Brad Hawk drew aside to allow her to pass. She seemed entirely unconscious of her surroundings.

Of a sudden, the outlaw leader understood her actions. She was walking in a somnambulistic trance.

Straight past them she moved, and then the desperado chief arose to his feet, Ugly Ike imitating his example. Silently they crept along after the unlucky girl whom they had selected for a victim.

But Bess did not go far before she paused.

"Ef she turns back, we'll grab her," whispered Black Brad.

Ugly Ike was filled with wonder, for he knew nothing of sleep-walking, and he could not understand why the girl had not already discovered their presence.

After a moment, the maiden did turn back, but she did not seem to see the men, although they were directly in her path.

"Ketch holt!" hissed Brad.

In another moment the girl was in the hands of the two villains. Then she awoke, and, before Hawk could cover her mouth with his hand, her shriek had aroused the camp.

The shock of such an awakening would have killed some sleep-walkers. Not so Little Bess; but when she felt that stifling hand close over her lips, she lost consciousness in a swoon.

"She's fainted!" quickly whispered Black Brad. "I kin handle her now, Ike. You kiver my retreat ef them galoots back thar kem hustlin' this yere way."

But it was not found necessary for Ike to "kiver" his chief's retreat, and soon the ruffianly trio were moving cautiously and swiftly

from the vicinity of the camp, all being mounted, and Hawk holding his senseless captive in his arms.

They could hear the cries of the excited men who had discovered the girl was missing, but the sounds did not seem to be coming nearer.

"We'll keep clost in ther shadders," said the leader of the desperate three, "an' I reckon they'll hev er hard time follerin' us afore mornin'."

"An' by thet time we'll be with Two Hosses an' his braves."

"You bet!"

From the slight eminence upon which they had first sighted the glimmer of the camp-fire, they descended into a narrow valley, and from that time till they were some miles away they took great care to keep in the shadows.

At length Brad said:

"I don't like this yere stillness of this gal. She oughter come roun'."

As if his words had aroused her, Bessie started and uttered a low moan.

"I reckon she's comin' roun' all right, boss," said Bad-eye Bob.

"Give me your whisky, Bob," requested the chief.

A flask quickly changed hands.

Hawk drew to a halt long enough to allow a few drops of the fiery stuff to pass the girl's lips. This set her to strangling and coughing, but seemed immediately to restore her senses.

"Where am I?" she asked, when she could catch her breath. "What does this mean?"

"Ye'er all right, me leetle leddy," assured Black Brad. "Don't you worry, fer you sha'n't be harmed."

His voice sounded strange to her, but still she could not understand what had happened. Where was she? Who were these men? In vain she asked the questions.

"Jest you keep still an' you'll know it's all right," asserted the leader. "We hain't got no time ter 'splain things now, but I'll 'splain soon's we git outer danger."

"Danger—what danger?"

But he insisted he could not stop to explain, and once more they moved onward.

The girl set about trying to understand what had occurred, for she felt she had in some way fallen into evil hands. The task was too much for her, and after a long time she began once more to entreat an explanation.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

"To a place of safety," was the reply.

"How can that be true when I was safe with my father before? Oh, I believe you are wicked men! What have you done to my poor father?"

Black Brad sought to silence her with a stern command:

"Be still!"

"I will not be still!" she retorted, with fire. "Now I know you are bad men! Help! help!"

"You are only wastin' yer breath, my dear, fer thar hain't nobody ter hear ye squawk, so ye might jest as well keep yer trap shet."

"God always hears the cry of the weak! Help! help!"

"Halt there!"

The cry came from the shadows at one side of the valley, and the startled desperadoes discerned the figures of men and horses.

The cry was repeated:

"Halt, or we will riddle you with lead!"

"Ter blazes with ye!" yelled Black Brad.

Then the desperado leader drove the spurs into his mettlesome horse and went dashing swiftly into the deeper shadows of the valley, his companions at his heels.

There were two red spouts of flame in the darkness and two bullets whistled high over the heads of the fleeing party.

"Help!" shrieked Little Bess. "Save me! save me!"

Her cry was answered by manly shouts, and the ruffians heard the sounds of iron-shod hoofs, telling they were pursued.

With exclamations of rage, Ugly Ike and Bad-eye Bob wheeled in their saddles, revolvers ready. Again the shadows were punctured by two spots of flame, again two shots woke the echoes of the night, again two bits of lead were sent searching for human lives.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNPLEASANT PREDICAMENT.

WITHIN the borders of a small grove stood two men who were excited witnesses of a race for life out on the open plain. They were Pardan Monima and Conrad Vincent, Old Blossom's comrades.

Monima was the older, being at least fifty years of age. He was a tall, bearded, stern-ap-

pearing man, dressed in stout, serviceable clothes, and fully armed.

Vincent was younger, being about twenty-two or three. He was a rather handsome fellow, blue-eyed honest appearing and manly. He was clothed and armed much like his companion.

Together they had witnessed the sudden appearance of the Apaches and the immediate flight of Old Blossom.

"Where in the world did those red-skins come from?" asked Conrad, in perplexity. "They seemed to rise out of the ground."

"I should say they were also attempting to stalk those antelopes when they espied our friend," was Monima's reply.

"But what can we do? We must help him in some way!"

"I scarcely understand how we are going to do such a thing. The race is taking him further from us with each moment."

"But it does not seem right for us to remain here in safety while he is in so much danger."

"Danger? I do not know about that. Dan Pike is an old plainsman, and he will escape from those red demons if any living man can do so. He has a good horse, and it is plain he is more than holding his own."

Vincent could not understand his friend's coolness under the circumstances, and he cast a wondering look at him.

Away out on the plain the race continued, the yells of the Apaches and the defiant cries of the white man growing fainter each moment.

And so the two men in the grove stood and watched the exciting scene till the figures of men and horses were shrouded in the dust clouds of the desert, upon the very border of which the knot of timber stood. Even then they were not satisfied, and they strained their eyes till the dust clouds could no longer be seen and nothing lay before them but the long level stretch of barren waste, above which the heat-waves danced. Sand, sage-brush and cacti as far as the eye could reach.

"Well, I wonder if we shall ever see Old Blossom again," muttered Conrad, as they turned back into the grove.

"As surely as we live long enough we shall," replied Pardan Monima, with confidence. "The Apache is not born who will lift that old duck's scalp."

"I hope you speak the truth, for I have taken a great liking to him. He is such a queer, jolly old fellow that a person cannot help liking him."

"You speak the truth, but I hope he will escape for still another reason. Without him, our search for the Phantom Ship will be at an end."

Conrad turned squarely on the speaker.

"Oh, say!" he exclaimed, a twinkle of laughter in his eyes. "Do you really take any stock in that ship business?"

With gravity, the older man answered:

"To be sure I do. If I did not, I should not be here. Even you must put some faith in it."

"Why?"

"If you did not believe there was a chance to find the old Spanish craft and discover the treasure it is said to contain, why did you join us in the search?"

"I had nothing else to do, and I was looking for adventure. That is an honest answer. For no other reason did I join in the search, for I tell you frankly, Mr. Monima, I believe the ship only a mirage."

"And have you studied up on mirages?"

"Can't say I have."

Pardan Monima waved his hand, as if to say that settled it.

"I have taken the pains to do so," he asserted. "The mirage of a lake of water may be nothing but the sun's rays beating on a level waste of sand; but where there is a well defined object like this ship and it is seen repeatedly by different persons, there is always an original somewhere. It is the original for which we have started out to search, and it is the original I hope we may find, with Old Blossom's aid."

Conrad laughed.

"Well, if there is an original, I certainly shall not object to finding it."

With this, the subject was dropped for a time.

Within a little opening in the grove were three horses, one being a pack-animal. A tiny spring of water lying in the shade of a mass of vines told how the fortune-seeking trio came to select the spot as a camping-place.

The saddles and pack had been removed from the horses' backs, and the animals were eagerly nibbling at some fresh grass which grew within the little opening.

"It is lucky for us we had not built the fire, as we intended doing," remarked Pardan.

"How so?"

"The smoke might have brought the Apaches down on us. Now that we have seen them and know there may be more in the vicinity, we can be cautious."

They made a meal off such provisions as were on hand, washing the dried meat down with draughts from the little spring.

After that, frequent excursions were made to the border of the oasis, and the surrounding plain was swept by the field glass in their possession, both of them hoping to see some sign of Old Blossom's returning figure.

They were disappointed.

The day crept slowly away, but the old guide and prospector did not return.

"I fear the Apaches captured him after all," said Conrad.

Monima did not think so.

"Something assures me that he escaped them," he declared. "My only fear now is that the red-skins will take the back trail and discover us here. This is a bad place to stop, for it is evidently the principal watering place of this section. These beaten paths leading to the spring tell that. If any band of warriors should happen to be passing, they would surely call here. In that case, we would be in a bad box."

"Then why not leave here at once?"

"You forget Old Blossom."

"True, I did forget him for a moment. But can't we leave word some way so he will know how to follow us? You know he is a wonderful trailer."

"But no more wonderful than the average Apache. When we leave the grove we must not leave a trail behind us."

"How can it be avoided?"

That was a hard question to answer.

"We might make some mufflers for our horses' feet," suggested the older man.

This was fully discussed, but the plan was finally abandoned as not practicable. After a long time, they decided to leave the grove in the brief space of time between sunset and moonrise and seek to make their trail difficult to follow when they struck a section of land where it could be easily covered.

But how were they to let Old Blossom know where to find them?

That was the question which troubled them the most, but they finally decided to leave a note by the spring, telling which direction they had taken.

"Apaches cannot read the pale-faces' paper talk," said Monima. "If they found the note, they would be none the better informed as to the course we had taken."

Then came the question as to which course they should pursue. It was finally decided to go on to the low hills toward which they had been heading when they stopped at the grove.

This having been decided, they patiently awaited the coming of night.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CHASE AND WHAT FOLLOWED.

JUST after the sun disappeared behind the horizon a soft, white haze settled over the plain. Pardan Monima and Conrad Vincent seized the opportunity to leave the little grove of mesquite and oak. Turning their faces toward the west, they struck out for the distant hills.

The haze soon disappeared, and then they went speeding away beneath a sky studded with silver stars. The clear white moon shone as if it were burnished. The heat of the day was followed by the cool breezes of early evening, and the young night seemed a perfect thing.

"This is glorious," laughed Conrad. "Such a night as this fills one with new life, and such a night as this is only to be found in Arizona!"

Monima said nothing. Plainly he was not of a very poetic turn.

For hours they rode on to the westward, but at last the hills were reached.

"Now to find a suitable camping-place," said Pardan. "We may not be able to strike water to-night, but we ought to have little trouble in finding it to-morrow."

They proceeded into the hills for some distance, finally halting in a little valley.

While they were discussing the advisability of stopping there, Con suddenly interrupted with an exclamation:

"Hush!"

Both listened. Through the still night came the sounds of hoof-beats.

"Horsemen, by Jove!"

"And they are coming this way!"

Having no desire to be discovered, they drew back into the deep shadows at one side of the

valley, that being the only cover they were able to find just then.

Nearer came the night riders, then Pardan and Conrad heard the sound of voices.

"I believe they are white men!" exclaimed the younger man.

"They may be enemies just the same," returned Pardan, in a whisper. "Keep still! We cannot afford to take our chances by exposing ourselves. There are many lawless white men in Arizona."

There was great danger the horses would betray them when they scented others of their species, and the two treasure-seekers felt they were in constantly increasing danger. For some reason, the thought of flight occurred to neither. With their hands on their weapons, they waited.

As the sounds of voices came nearer, they were able to distinguish the tones of a female, and that filled them with amazement and uncertainty.

But they were not long left in doubt. The stern voice of Black Brad, the Border Hawk, commanding his captive to be silent, told them plainly enough the girl was an unwilling captive.

Then, in the dusk of the little valley they discerned the figures of the horsemen.

"Help! help!"

It was the maiden's voice raised in an appeal. What man could withstand such an entreaty? Cocking a revolver, Conrad Vincent shouted:

"Halt there!"

Plainly the horsemen were taken by surprise, but they made no move to obey. Instead, they urged their horses to a faster pace.

"Halt, or we will riddle you with lead!" cried Conrad.

By this time Pardan had also drawn a revolver, their rifles being slung at their backs.

"Ter blazes with ye!" came back the defiance of Black Brad, and the three horses, one bearing a double burden, went dashing away through the night.

"Shoot high, or we may hit the girl!" fell from Monima's lips, and then their revolvers spoke.

Once more the captive maiden shrieked for help, and, answering her cry, the two men spurred in pursuit. But they little dreamed what a baffling drag their pack-horse would be. The animal was a very inferior beast, and, although one of the ruffians' horses bore a double burden, the pack-horse held Monima back. Vincent, having no thought of the animal, quickly surged ahead.

Finding they were pursued, the kidnappers turned and sent back some bullets that whistled about the ears of our friends.

It was a wild chase beneath the Arizona stars. The echoes of the little valley were aroused by the ring of iron-shod hoofs and the cries of angry men. The girl no longer uttered her appeals for help, a broad hand being pressed over her mouth.

Although quite unaware of the fact, Conrad Vincent rapidly drew away from his friend, Monima finding it impossible to drag the pack-animal along fast enough to keep up.

The ruffianly trio were all well mounted, for they led Con a hot chase, and his horse was not a mean animal. Their shouts kept him from hearing the cries of his companion, who shouted for him to halt. It is doubtful if he would have obeyed had he heard, for the fever of the chase was throbbing in his veins.

Monima was compelled to halt, but Conrad still went on, unconsciously passing from valley to ravine, the outlaws making half a dozen turns.

The young man little considered the force against which he would have to contend, single-handed, should he overtake them.

But he was not destined to overtake them.

Finding themselves hard pressed, the outlaws set a trap, and, of a sudden, as Vincent swung from one ravine into another, there were two spouts of flame in his very face, and then he sunk forward on the neck of his horse in a semi-unconscious state.

The animal wheeled and went dashing back, the limp burden still clinging to its back.

"Shell we foller an' finish ther job, boss?" asked the voice of Ugly Ike, as two horsemen rode out from behind some boulders.

"No; let him go."

"But ther boss, Cap?"

"We cannot afford the time it w'd take ter secure ther critter. Come on, an' we'll overtake Bob."

Then they rode from the scene of their dastardly work.

Conrad Vincent was not seriously wounded,

the bullet having grazed his skull and stunned him for the time; but when he became conscious, he was still confused and could not understand what had happened.

For more than an hour he allowed the horse to carry him in whatever direction it chose. His will-power seemed dazed, paralyzed.

At length he seemed to awaken as from a lethargy.

"Where am I now?" he muttered, gazing around. "It is night, and the moon is shining up there, but its rays do not get to the bottom of this ravine. My head throbs as if it would burst. What has happened, and how came I here?"

He lifted his hand to his head, and discovered his hair was damp and sticky. The light of the stars was enough to show him a dark stain on his fingers.

"I believe it is blood, but how came it there? Have I been injured? That is it! I have been wounded, and that is why my head is throbbing so. I can almost remember."

Little by little his memory served him till, at last, he could recollect all that had occurred.

"They ambushed me! What fortune that I was not killed! I scarcely understand how I escaped them after they shot me down. I must have clung to my horse, and he carried me to safety. But where is Monima?"

That was a question he could not answer, but he at once started out to find his companion. This proved anything but an easy task, for he was completely bewildered and knew not which way to turn. Trusting much to the sagacity of his horse he allowed the animal to wander on and on.

How long or how far they went Conrad could not tell. It seemed he had been in the saddle many hours and passed over uncounted miles. He thought the night must be well-spent and morning close at hand.

Finally, the horror of the situation came upon him with full force. He was alone in the wilds of Arizona; he had only his horse, his weapons and some matches. Provisions he had none. His situation was desperate indeed, and, if he were not fortunate enough to find his companions, he might perish in the desert.

He was thinking of these things, his head bowed, as his horse carried him to the top of a slope. The moon was well over into the western sky, and the stars had grown pale.

At the top of the slope the horse halted. Conrad looked up and saw there was a sharp descent before him.

But that was not all he saw.

In the depths of the pocket at his feet he caught the gleam of a camp-fire.

An exclamation of delight came from his lips. "A camp-fire! Ten to one it was built by white men! I may find friends down there!"

He also knew he might find enemies, so he cautiously dismounted and hitched his horse. Then the rifle left his back for his hands, and he began creeping down into the hollow.

Soon the sounds of voices came to his ears, but they were mingled in an inarticulate murmur. For all of that, there was something about the sound that caused him to redouble his caution.

Like a snake he crept down into the hollow, carefully avoiding the patches of moonlight, taking advantage of rocks and bushes. As he advanced, the voices became more distinct, and he finally decided they were those of red-men. Then he halted in indecision.

Should he turn back and seek safety in flight?

He asked himself the question, but a feeling of intense curiosity drew him on. With still greater caution, he crept forward again.

After a time he gained a position where he could look down into the pocket.

A strange scene met his gaze.

The light of several fires showed him a scene of activity. Two score of Indians were moving about, many of them being squaws. They seemed to have lately arrived at a decision of some sort, for a sudden medley of sounds arose, shouts, neighing of ponies and barking of dogs. The firelight revealed a small collection of smoked-stained tepees, but even as he gazed, those transferable homes of the red-skins began to fall. The Indians were on the point of moving.

Among the red-men Conrad saw two or three pale-faces.

It was a novel sight, and the young spy almost forgot the peril of his position as he lay watching the tepees falling before his gaze.

The squaws were doing the greater part of the work, the bucks getting their own particular ponies ready for the march. It was plain the start was to be made before daylight in order that they might travel while it was cool, and

they would probably rest during the heat of the day.

The white men seemed as much at home in the camp as did the savages themselves, and the thought came to Conrad that they might be the very men he had pursued.

He was right!

At length the spy turned to creep back toward his horse.

At that very moment a dusky figure bounded through the air, alighting fairly on Conrad's shoulders, crushing the young man to the ground with a terrible shock.

Then the triumphant whoop of a Ute warrior rung out!

CHAPTER IX.

DEADLY FOES IN DUEL.

OLD JIM PIKE reeled back, dropping the torch, and was caught in his brother's strong arms.

"My God!" he groaned. "My leetle gal! she is gone!"

"Wobble-j'inted Maria!" spluttered Old Blossom. "Brace up, James! She may be clost erbout."

"But thet cry! Suthin's happened ter her! Thet cry woke me outer a soun' sleep!"

"Und dot's der madder mit Hans!" cried the Dutch lad. "He vas sleebin' so tight as nefer vas v'en he heart der squawk. Ach, Himmel! Der leedle miss vas kilt entirely, I pelieve I dunno!"

"She may be near at hand," said Chris, speaking with as much calmness as he could command. "Call to your daughter, old man! She may answer you."

Then Pike shouted Bessie's name, but cll to no avail. She could not answer if she heard, for a broad hand covered her mouth and she was being borne swiftly away.

"Torches, pards!" sharply commanded Round-up Rube. "Git torches an' we'll hunt fer her!"

The command was swiftly obeyed, and soon the four were scouring the pocket in the vicinity of the camp, the agonized parent calling wildly to his child.

The derisive hoot of an owl was his only reply.

The search proved fruitless, for the kidnapers had gotten safely away with their innocent victim.

There were four sorrowful-looking men and a very blank-faced boy who gathered around the fire. Old Jim was nearly prostrated.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "I hedn't oughter taken her inter these parts, but she wanted ter come erlong. Now I am punished fer lettin' her! I never'll see my leetle gal again!"

In vain they tried to comfort him. Seizing another brand, he once more started out to search for the lost one.

"Pore Jim!" muttered Old Blossom, shaking his head. "Pore ole Jim!"

"What do you think has become of the girl, Rube?" asked Chris, who was restraining his feelings as much as possible.

The bow-legged cowboy shook his head.

"I can't jest tell, lad. Mebbe she's bin gobbled by reds, though why ther varmint sh'udn't 'a' drapped down on us all is a mystery."

Then they questioned Old Blossom, and learned all he knew about the singular disappearance.

"We'll fine some trace o' her in ther mornin', I reckon," said the old Nomad.

"Mebbe so; mebbe not," retorted Round-up Rube. "They may git her away 'thout leavin' a trace behind."

"Waal, they've got ter be mighty peert ter do thet. I reckon we'll be able ter strike ther trail 'thout trouble."

"You seem to feel confident she has been captured by savages," said Chris. "You do not seem to take into consideration the fact she may have been pounced upon by some prowling animal."

"Ef she hed," asserted Rube, "we'd heerd more'n one squawk. Eh, Bloss?"

Old Blossom nodded.

"I 'low it wuz human critters as done ther job, though it puzzles me ter understan' how it wuz worked. Hark!"

They listened and heard Jim Pike plaintively calling to his child. It was a sad sound that smote the hearts of all.

"Pore ole Jim!" and Blossom wiped a tear from his eye.

"Hear me!" cried Chris Comstock, placing his left hand over his heart and lifting his right toward heaven. "I solemnly swear never to know any rest till I have solved the mystery of Little Bessie's fate and punished those who have harmed her, if she has been harmed!"

"I'm with ye, boy!" cried Rube, holding out his hand.

"Me too, by ther ham-fat they sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!"

The trio clasped hands.

"I dinks berhabs dot leaves me oudt uf der contracts!" exclaimed Roly Poly. "All der same dose Injunes vill findt me von very pad poy mit der two eyes uf him beeled like some onions. Yaw, you pets you!"

There was no more sleep in that camp that night. In vain they tried to induce Jim Pike to come in and remain quiet till morning. He would remain by the fire a short time, then he would spring up, seize a brand and start on another search. He really had no hope of finding anything, but it seemed impossible for him to keep still.

Morning was not far away when the men were startled by the tread of horses' feet. Old Jim had been sitting by the fire for several minutes when these sounds were heard. All started to their feet, and out from the shadows came two horses and a single rider, one being a pack-animal.

The horseman was Pardan Monima.

In a moment he found himself covered by cocked weapons.

"Hold hard, thar!" cried Old Blossom. "Don't shoot! I'm blowed ter Glory ef 'tain't Pardan!"

"Hello, Old Blossom!" cried the horseman. "Is that you, alive and unscalped?"

"Waal, you jest bet, ole hoss! I'm hyer, ez big ez life an' twice as natteral. But whar's Con?"

By this time the old Nomad had reached Monima's side and clasped his hand.

"With a few direct words, Parden explained what had happened, saying he had endeavored to follow Conrad, but had become puzzled and dazed. As a result he was quite turned about and had been traveling on the back track for a long time.

"Thet 'splains 'bout ther loss o' ther gal!" cried Old Blossom, excitedly. "Thet wuz her them critters hed! Holy cats! I wish you hed inoculated ther both o' 'em with lead pills!"

All this time Jim Pike had been staring at Monima in a singular fashion. Suddenly a hoarse cry came from his lips, and he strode forward, the firelight falling on a revolver that gleamed in his hand.

"You cannot believe thet critter's story!" he declared, his eyes blazing. "It's more'n likely he kerried off Leetle Bess him own self! Thet is ther wurst snake thet crawls ther face o' God's earth!"

All stared at the speaker in the greatest amazement, Monima seeming no less astonished than the others.

"You can't deceive me with yer looks!" savagely shouted Old Jim. "I know ye, dastard!"

"But I do not know you," retorted Monima.

"Liar!"

The old treasure-seeker seemed like a madman at that moment. His face was white and he trembled in every limb, while his eyes seemed like living coals.

"Get down from thet hoss, Hybal Harper!"

"Hybal Harper?"

"Yes, fer thet is your name. You need not deny it! We hev met, though I asked God to keep us apart thet my hands might not be stained with human blood."

"Man, you are mad!"

This only seemed to increase Jim's rage.

"You can't git out o' it in thet way, you snake! Git off thet hoss, I say!"

"And be shot down 'like a dog by a crazy man! No, I'm not such a fool!"

Monima's hand stole toward a weapon, but Pike called sharply:

"Hey-up thar! I'll bore ye ef you try it!"

Then the horseman appealed to the others.

"Men, will you see this crazy creature shoot me without giving me a show for my life?"

"They hain't got northin' ter do with it," asserted Old Jim. "'Sides thet, I am not goin' ter shoot ye 'thout guvin' ye a squar' show. But we're goin' ter settle the ole score right hyer now!"

"What old score?"

"Don't make er 'tarnal fool o' yerself, Harper," advised the old treasure-seeker. "You know w'at I mean, so thar hain't no need o' beatin' roun' ther bush."

"But I do not know what you mean!"

"Jest ez big er derved liar ez ever ye wuz! You've got er slick tongue in yer head, Hybal, but you kin delude soft-headed an' shaller-hearted wimmin better than ye kin men. I know ye through an' through, ye wretch!"

Pardan Monima's eyes flashed with anger.

"You are carryin' this thing altogether too far, old man! I do not know you; I never set eyes on you before."

"Oh, w'at a liar! You—you are ther critter I saved from death at ther hands o' three Mexicans! They hed cut ye up purty bad, an' wuz on ther p'int o' finishin' ther job when I dipped in. But fer me, they'd riddled ye with ther knives. I pulled ye out o' ther saloon an' tuck ye ter my home, whar my wife nussed ye back ter life an' health. Thet wuz fifteen year ergo, but I knew ye ther minute I sot eyes on yer face."

"You—you have made a mistake. It was—"

"Yes, I made a mistake. I oughter let ther Greasers finish ye! It w'd hev bin ther best thing of my life ef I hed! Oh, I made er fearful mistake!"

"I tell you you are wrong, old man! I was never in such an encounter as you describe. Fifteen years is a long time, and you are mistaken in thinking I am the man you saved."

"You are Hybal Harper!"

The accused was silent.

"See!" cried Old Jim, triumphantly. "Look at his face! That tells the story! He does not deny he is Harper—he cannot! *Wretch, where is my wife?*"

"Your wife?"

"Yes, the woman you lured from her home with your smooth, serpent's tongue! The soft-headed, hard-hearted creature who deserted her husband and her child to fly with you! Where is she? Speak! speak!"

"I tell you—"

With a cry of fury, Pike sprang upward, grasped Monima and dragged him from the saddle. A sharp, savage struggle ensued. It was impossible to tell what the result would be, and the others tore the two men apart.

Panting, grinding his teeth, Jim Pike glared at his foe, seemingly having forgotten the revolver he still clutched.

"All I ask is a fair show," said Monima, when he could catch his breath. "If I must fight this crazy old fool, I would meet him on equal footing. Surely you will allow me that much?"

Old Blossom nodded. The Nomad's face had grown strangely stern within the last few minutes, and now he stepped to his brother's side.

"Jim," he said, in a low tone, "I thought you tole me *she* wuz dead?"

Bessie's father started and looked at him.

"She is dead," he replied—"dead ter me an' Leetle Bess. I hev brung ther gal up ter think her mother dead."

"But are ye shore this is ther critter—ther one who lured her frum ye?"

"Shore—yes! He does not deny he is Hybal Harper—he dares not deny it! You go ask him that an' see ef he will."

Old Blossom turned toward his former comrade. As he approached, Monima exclaimed:

"Have you turned against me, Old Blossom?"

"Are you Hybal Harper?"

No reply.

"You do not answer, Monima. Tell ther truth, man! Wuz you ever known as Hybal Harper?"

"Once that was my name," came the low reply.

"Thet settles it. Thet man is my brother. You must meet him in er squar' duel."

Pardan bowed.

"Very well," he said coldly. "I am forced into this, and I will not be responsible. Make your arrangements."

The arrangements were simple. The two men soon faced each other in the light of the camp-fire, and waited for the signal.

CHAPTER X.

RESULT OF THE DUEL.

THE right hand of each man clutched a revolver and they stood ten paces apart. The flaring light of the fire would make their aim somewhat uncertain.

On Monima's face was a look like that of an animal driven at bay; old Jim's eyes still gleamed with the deadly fire of intense hatred.

Back in the edge of the shadows crouched Roly Poly Hans, his eyes seeming ready to pop out of his head, his entire body shaking with fear, as he muttered:

"Ach, himmel! Nefer pefore dit I see der likes uf dot! Dose two beebles vas goin' vor ter sot dermselves up vor some dargets, I believe! Dunder und blitzens! Pefore I would do dot, I would go drowned meinseluf in some dry vell mit der pottoms vas fallen oudt uf! I hat petter cut mein throat mit der packside edge uf von axes than do dot! Yaw, dot vas apout der vay I look at him."

Chris Comstock and Round-up Rube, their faces grave and stern, stood at one side.

Old Blossom was to give the signal.

"Hybal Harper," called Old Jim, his voice shaking with the intensity of his feelings, "I am going to putt a bullet clean through your black heart!"

"Holy smoke!" muttered Round-up Rube. "He'll never do it 'less he is stiddier then he is now. He's shakin' like he had ther ager."

"Hadn't we better stop ther duel?" asked Chris, apprehensively. "Bessie is sure to lose her father if it goes on."

"It hain't our place ter interfere, lad, ef Ole Blossom don't see fit ter. Jest you keep yer shirt on an' let her went."

"Old man," came slowly from Monima's lips, "I do not want your life, but you have forced me into this, and I must defend myself. You are all in error—"

"Ernough o' thet!" snarled Old Jim. "You hev not denied bein' Hybal Harper! I know ye fer ther dastard as run erway with my wife! God will direct my bullet! Prepare ter die!"

"Gentlemen," cried Monima to those who were looking on, "you can see I am forced into this. The old man will not hear a word of reason; he is blinded by rage. If I kill him—what?"

Dead silence followed the question.

"I trust you are honorable men," Monima continued. "You should see the situation I am in. What guarantee have I that, if I am the victor, you will not immediately riddle me with lead?"

"You hev my word," cried Old Jim.

"That is not enough. They might see fit to ignore it if I dropped you."

The old treasure-seeker turned to the others.

"Boys," he said, "I'm goin' ter kill that man, so ye needn't be skeered 'bout promisin' him anythin'."

"What duz he want?" asked Old Blossom.

"A fair show," came promptly from Pardan's lips. "If any of this party is to turn avenger in case I am the fortunate one in this duel, I want to know it now. I also want a fair start. I do not want to fight the whole party."

"Thet's fair, by gum!" exclaimed Round-up Rube.

"How much start will you desire, critter?" asked Old Jim.

"An hour."

"They shell guv ye two hours."

This was agreed to, and once more the men fell into position for the deadly duel. Old Blossom stepped forward, saying:

"Ther word 'went' is goin' ter be ther signal, so ye want ter look out fer it. Are ye reddy?"

Both bowed.

"Squint!"

The right hands of the duelists came up and the firelight flashed on their revolvers.

"Let—her—went!"

At the word, both weapons spoke as one.

With a deep groan, Jim Pike dropped his revolver and sunk to the ground.

For a moment Pardan Monima stood rigid as an image of marble. The spectators fancied he had not been touched.

But suddenly he staggered forward a step and sunk limply to the earth.

"Great wobble-jinted Maria!" spluttered Old Blossom, springing to his brother's side and bending over him. "Ther all two both o' 'em hes cotched it!"

Sympathy was with Pike, and they gathered around him.

"Where is he hit?" asked Chris, anxiously.

"Is he socked fer keeps?" inquired Round-up Rube.

In a moment the bow-legged cowboy and Old Blossom were looking for the wound. They quickly found it, and on exposing it with a few slashes of a keen knife, it was seen it might be of a serious nature. Indeed, Old Blossom's first thought was that the bullet had passed straight through the unlucky duelist's heart.

"Pore Jim!" came chokingly from the Nomad. "He has crossed ther dark river! Pore boy! He wuz—*Wat!*"

To the astonishment of the three, Jim Pike opened his eyes and looked at them. Then his lips moved, and he whispered:

"Did—I—kill—him?"

"I reckon ye did," answered Round-up Rube. "We hain't looked at ther critter, but ye popped him over."

At this moment a cry from Roly Poly Hans startled them.

"Shiminy dunder! Look oudt vor dot corpses!"

They wheeled just in time to see Pardan Monima swing himself upon the back of his

horse, give the animal the spur and go dashing into the shadows.

Cowboy Chris snatched out a revolver and would have sent several bullets after the escaping man, but the voice of Old Jim Pike stopped him.

"Hold, pard!" cried the wounded man, in a strong voice. "Don't fire! That imp of Satan is mine, and my hand shall take his life!"

It seemed like the foolish oath of a dying man, but it checked the young cowboy's move till Monima was safe under cover of the shadows.

"I will yet hunt ther varmint down!" cried Jim Pike.

A closer examination of his wound revealed the fact that the bullet had glanced on a rib and the man was far from fatally injured. With a skill that was creditable, Old Blossom extracted the bullet, Jim submitting to the ordeal without a murmur.

"It'll lay ye up fer er bit," said the old Nomad; "but you'll be 'round in er few days."

Those words grated harshly on Jim Pike's ears.

"Oh, Bess!" he cried, in agony, "my leetle Bess! W'at'll become of her?"

"Pard," said the bow-legged cowboy, soberly, "wen it comes light me an' Chris hyer'll take ther trail o' ther varmints as stole her, an' we won't come back tell we bring her with us. Eh, lad?"

"You have spoken," said Cowboy Chris.

"An' you mus' go, too, Dan!" cried Jim.

"An' leave you hyer fer thet critter ter come back an' murder! Waal, I guess not!"

In vain Jim Pike insisted his brother must go. Old Blossom declared he would not desert his brother till the wounded man was able to look out for himself.

So it was decided Rube and Chris should take the trail in the morning, while Old Blossom and Roly Poly Hans staid behind to look after the wounded man.

CHAPTER XI.

CROSSING THE DEAD DESERT.

ALTHOUGH stunned by the shock of the body that had alighted on his shoulders and crushed him to the ground, Conrad Vincent instantly comprehended the nature of the assault, and knew that loud whoop would bring a dozen skins to the spot in a few seconds.

With these thoughts in his mind, he made a desperate attempt to shake that clinging form from his back, but the red brave stuck there like a leech. Con reached for his knife, but he felt an iron clutch on his wrists just as his fingers closed on the haft of the weapon.

"Ugh! White man keep still or him git kill!"

But Con thought it better to die fighting than to perish by torture, and he continued to struggle with all his strength.

Useless efforts!

In a short time other dusky figures came hurrying up, Con was seized, bound, and marched in triumph toward the fires.

"I'm afraid the jig is up with me," thought the unlucky young fellow.

He was amazed to see how fast the tepees had been razed, for when he reached the fires there was but one standing, and even as he looked, that came down with a rush.

Conrad was marched up before a squat, scowling, ugly-looking savage, who glared at the captive as if he would like to devour him. Back of the red-skin chief stood two white men, and they were Black Brad and Ugly Ike.

"Pale-face spy!" grunted the squat chief, Two Horses. "What him want here?"

"Nothing at all, I assure you," replied Con, putting on a bold face. "In fact, I wish I were anywhere else in the world but here."

"Pale-face lone?"

"Not much," answered the captive, believing a falsehood justifiable under the circumstances.

"Him odder pale-faces nigh?"

"Well, they are not far away, old horse."

"Where um be?"

"Now, ther's telling."

This answer seemed to puzzle the chief.

Black Brac stepped forward, saying:

"What did I tell ye, Two Horses! There are many pale-faces nigh, an' ther sooner we git movin', ther better it'll be fer us."

Two Horses turned to some of his braves and spoke a few hurried words. In another moment half a dozen young bucks went scudding away in as many different directions, and disappeared in the gloom.

Conrad knew they had gone to ascertain if there were other whites near.

"What do with young pale-face?" asked Two Horses of Black Brad.

"Kill him!" returned the cold-blooded rene-

gade. "Thet's ther best way ter dispose of thet critter."

Two Horses shook his head.

"Kill pale-face here leave bad sign behind," he asserted. "Odder pale-faces see um sign, him take Injun's trail git big revenge. Two Hosses him take pale-face to village."

"Thet's whar ye are foolish, red-skin," asserted the outlaw, who did not seem to stand in any awe of the Ute chief. "He'll jest be er 'tarnal bother on our han's. We don't want no captives to fuss with."

"How 'bout white gal?" asked the chief, a strange look on his face.

"Oh, thet's diffrent!" asserted the Border Hawk. "To be course, we'll take her 'long."

"Take one, take two," declared Two Horses. "That settles um."

The last three words showed that the red chief had caught the latest pale-face slang.

Black Brad fell back in disgust.

Conrad had heard enough to set his mind at rest on two points. He would not be slain immediately, and, without doubt, the very girl he had sought to rescue was a captive with these red wretches. As he gazed at Black Brad, and Ugly Ike, he decided they were the very men he had pursued at an earlier hour of the night.

In a short time one of the red-skins who had departed at the command of the chief came in, leading Conrad's horse.

The pale-face captive was then put in charge of the buck who had first detected his presence, while preparations for the move went on.

Black Brad and Ugly Ike came and stood glaring at Conrad.

"Well," said the young man, quite coolly, "I reckon you galoots will know me next time."

"Pr'aps we might ef ye hed thet blood washed off yer face," said Ike.

"How did thet come thar?" asked Brad.

"Oh, I fell down and stepped on my head," was the grave reply, "but for that little misfortune, I would not be here now. It dazed me somewhat, and I ran right into this trap."

The two outlaws exchanged glances.

"Same critter," said Ike.

"I reckon," returned Brad.

"He must hev got arter us ag'in an' follered us hyer."

"Shore."

"Waal, he hes cooked his own goose."

"You bet."

"Two Hosses 'll fix him w'en he gits him ter his village over in ther mountains."

"Now ye're shoutin'!"

Having uttered these words, they walked away, leaving Con to his thoughts.

The young man tried to get a sight of the fair captive, but he was not successful till the entire party was ready to move. Then he saw Bessie mounted on a snow-white horse and closely guarded by Bad-eye Bob.

"By Jove!" thought Conrad; "she is a beauty!"

This was evident, despite the fact that excitement, exhaustion and despair had robbed her of her color and left her cheeks almost as white as driven snow.

The young man was compelled to mount his own horse, then his feet were tied beneath the animal's body, thus making him secure in the saddle. He dreaded the journey before him, well knowing how painful it would be to ride many miles with his hands confined at his back.

Soon the savages were ready to move, but by that time morning was not far away and the birds were chirping in the mesquite thickets. The stars were paling, and the flower-perfumed breath of a young day was faintly felt.

Out through the morning dusk stretched the long moving line, the different ones of the party taking up the march in regular order, every man and beast seeming to know their proper place. At the start the dogs were inclined to bark, but some sharp words from their masters or the squaws silenced them. Then away to the northwest they went.

When the sun came sailing up, y, throwing his golden glances across the world, the bright shafts fell upon a long line of dusky figures trailing away across a flower-bespangled plain and heading straight toward the desert that lay beyond. Straight ahead of them stretched a broad expanse that would have seemed limitless but for the fact that unnumbered miles away a noble range of mountains seemed to thrust their peaks out of the level waste. A purple haze hung around the irregular peaks, the tallest of which seemed to pierce the very sky.

Among those mountains, which were so plainly discernible on a clear day after the low hills had been passed and flower-prairie beyond was

reached, lay the village of the Utes, toward which the savages were heading. But beyond the flower-prairie and between them and the mountains lay a desert of sand, sage-brush and cacti.

"The Dead Desert" it was sometimes called.

It is needless to describe the journey in detail. During the first day the flower-prairie was passed, and at night the Indians halted in a grove not far from the border of the Dead Desert. There they filled their "water-skins" and made other preparations for the unpleasant march ahead. The mountains seemed much nearer at sunset, but they knew the rare air of Arizona well enough to understand how many weary miles intervened between them and the purple peaks even though they had never traversed the Dead Desert before—and some of them had crossed it scores of times.

That night Conrad sought to find a chance to speak with the girl captive, but both were too closely watched for anything like words to pass between them. However, they did exchange a few brief signals, but not without being detected.

Hatchet in hand, a surly warrior threatened Con, speaking some words in the Indian language. The young treasure-hunter could not understand the words, but, combined with the attitude of the brave, they were plainly an order for him to cease his signals or take the consequences.

So the signals were suspended, but the two captives had arrived at something like an understanding.

The second day found them out upon the Dead Desert, and Con soon decided it was well named, for before they had advanced many miles upon the arid plain he began to see the bleaching bones of cattle and wild animals that had perished there. Once he saw a human skeleton stretched beside the skeleton of a horse, and he knew the bones of both had been stripped by vultures and wild animals.

The sun seemed to grow hotter and hotter. It beat down mercilessly upon their heads, and the wind which swept across the plain seemed like a breath from a furnace. In its teeth it carries fine particles of sand that sting like the bite of insects whenever they strike the bare flesh.

At times they pass through thickets of cacti with crooked, scraggy branches, hirsute leaves, strange and grotesque shapes, but adorned by beautiful flowers. Then they strike tracts covered with clumps of hideous, unsightly greasewood, and the twisted branches make their advances much slower. Finally a long level desert of sand is reached, and there the signs of death are much more frequent, for bleaching bones are no rare sight.

Out upon the sand plain the sun's rays become almost unbearable, for the refraction from the white surface seems to sear the eyeballs. And there the cloud of gritty, stinging particles swept on by the strong wind becomes more intolerable.

Conrad was thinking of the fair girl captive. How would she endure the terrible journey? He pitied her and longed to do something to make her suffering less intense, but it was not in his power.

So the long, dreary day wore away. Twice Conrad was given a small amount of warm water to drink, but his suffering from thirst was great. However, it was useless to ask for water. Such a request was met by a blow.

Slowly, oh, so slowly! the mountains came nearer. He could see their rugged sides and knew there were cool shadows there. He thought it would be delightful to lie down in those shadows close beside some gushing fountain, drink his fill, then close his eyes and die!

The burning sun dropped beneath the horizon, and night came down with a swoop of its starry wings. Then a cool breeze swept the plain, alternate with hot currents. He knew it was a breath from the mountain gorges to the dark depths of which the burning sunlight never reached.

Still the savages pressed onward. Water must be reached before a halt was made.

It was not far from midnight when the dust-laden cavalcade reached the fertile section at the foot of the mountains and fresh water was found at last.

The Dead Desert was crossed!

CHAPTER XII.

SILENCE OR DEATH!

MOUNTAINS, snow-capped and hoary, on every hand. Beetling crags that overhang mighty chasms yawning far, far beneath. Desolate can-

yons that seem to hold some dreadful secret in their dark and silent bosoms. Mountains everywhere!

It is a grand, an awe-inspiring spectacle. It gives one a thrill of fear, a feeling of nameless horror. To a human being it imparts a knowledge of his own utter insignificance and the boundless power of the Almighty God upon whose handiwork he gazes.

Some of the mountains are covered with traces of vegetation, the pine and cedar clinging darkly to many a jagged cliff. Some are bleak and barren, cut by mighty chasms and strewn with huge boulders, many of which it seems the weight of a hand would send crashing and thundering into the dark depths below.

In the midst of this wild section lay the Ute village close beside a brawling stream of water that was fed by the melting snow of the cloud-crowned peaks. The place was well chosen, being high up amid the mountains. There were lofty pines, through the branches of which the mountain breeze was continually sighing in its song of mournful mystery. Beneath these were the smoke-stained tepees and lodges of the warriors. Underfoot the ground was covered by lush-grass and soft green moss, bespangled in untrodden spots by fair flowers that gave forth a sweet perfume.

On the outskirts of the village Indian ponies were cropping the rich grass. Noisy Indian lads were shooting at marks or trying feats of strength and skill. Braves lay stretched in positions of indolence and comfort, while their squaws brought wood and water and attended to such other labor as fell to their lot. From the fires the blue smoke rose lazily upward.

In the opening of one of the lodges Little Bess lay on a bearskin robe watching the singular scene before her. She was still very pale, and the dark circles around her eyes told of much weeping, but again and again she had been assured that no harm should come to her, and she had begun to take an interest in the unusual things to be seen in an Indian village.

But that was not her only reason for being at the opening of the lodge. In another of the lodges she knew her fellow captive, the handsome young man she had seen for the first time when they were crossing the flower-prairie, was confined. She had not been able to speak with him since reaching the village.

Before the lodge Bad-eye Bob lay slumbering on the ground. He was stationed there as a guard, but he considered the captive quite safe without troubling himself much about her.

Since reaching the village Bessie had several times spoken with a dark-eyed Mexican girl, who said she had been made a captive by the savages several years before. She said her name was Pepe, and, although her English was very bad, she was able to make Little Bess understand she would be glad to escape from the Indians.

As Bessie lay gazing out at the opening of the lodge, Pepe appeared.

"Buenos dias, senorita," she saluted, smiling.

Bessie beckoned her in, and soon the two were seated on the bearskin, Bad-eye Bob not having been awakened.

Pepe was dressed in a loose blouse waist and skirt of doeskin, the latter reaching to her ankles and being handsomely embroidered with beads and stained porcupine-quills. Her small and shapely feet were covered with beaded moccasins. She wore no head-dress, and her long dark hair fell unconfined down her back.

By means of signals and a few words the two girls carried on quite a conversation, succeeding in understanding each other very well. Pepe asked Bessie if she loved the young American captive, and seemed surprised when the girl laughed and shook her head.

"Si, senorita—si, si!" laughed the dark-eyed maid, yet with an air of relief. "Love he—you do, *alma mia*! You eye—show! Ha! ha! ha!"

After a time Little Bess succeeded in making Pepe understand the young American was an utter stranger to her, and the only tie between them was that of mutual misfortune. Then the Mexican maiden explained she was going to Conrad, and asked if Bessie would send any word to him.

The girl hesitated for some time, but finally asked the dark-skinned maiden to tell him she hoped he would escape from the savages.

"He mus'!" exclaimed Pepe, softly, but with excitement. "If no, some kill! Senor—senorita"—making motions meant to include the young man and Little Bess—"escape bote o time. *Quien sabe?*" (Who knows?)

Of course this gave the girl some hope,

though she could not see that Pepe would be able to assist in bringing such a desirable thing about.

Finally the dusky maiden arose to leave the lodge, bidding Bessie "Adios." She also explained she might come again.

From the opening Little Bess watched the willowy figure till it disappeared. A short time later, Pepe appeared once more, this time with some food, which she carried toward the lodge in which Conrad was confined.

The red-skin guard before the lodge stopped her, but he was a young brave, and Pepe had already found favor in his eyes. He could see no reason why he should deny her the privilege of carrying a small amount of food to the pale-face, for he informed her Two Horses had said the captive should die with another sun.

This was startling information, indeed, for Pepe, who had seen the young man and fallen in love with him at first sight. She knew the captive had not been condemned to death in council, for he had not been removed to the Death Lodge, but if Two Horses had fixed on the time of his death, the matter was as good as settled. The form of a council would be gone through with, but the final result would be the same.

So the Mexican maiden took the food to Conrad. He received it with thanks, and she eagerly asked if he could speak Spanish. Her delight at learning he could speak the language somewhat and could understand it better, can scarcely be described.

He was tied fast to some stakes driven in the ground, and she was obliged to feed the food to him. Seeing the red guard watching them suspiciously, she whispered for him to eat slowly.

For several moments the young buck continued to watch them, then, as if he thought it scarcely worth while, feeling sure the girl could not assist the captive to escape from the heart of the village in broad daylight, he dropped the skin which served as a flap for the opening.

Instantly the girl ceased to feed the captive, and began to examine his bonds, all the while watching closely that the guard did not detect her. As she worked on the bonds, she whispered in Spanish:

"On the morrow you are to die, for Two Horses has said it. To-night you must escape, if you hope to live. Your bonds I will fix so you can get free, but will leave them so no one can detect the change. You must make no move till it is night, and you hear me talking with the guard in front of the lodge. There, I have your bonds arranged. You can slip them if you try. See! I bury a knife here; I cover it with earth. By moving your body a bit, you can lay upon the spot, then it will not be discovered. When you hear me talking with the guard, you must get free, take the knife, cut a slit in the back of the lodge, and creep out. You must be silent as a serpent, yet move swiftly as the flight of a hawk. Down the gorge by the split rock you will find a horse. Once on its back, you should never be taken alive. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly. But what can be your reason for thus befriending me?"

"I have a reason, senor, but I cannot explain. You must do as I say. I am trusted by the red-men almost as if I were one of them. They think I have forgotten my home and my relatives. There is Spanish blood in my veins! I have not forgotten. Some day I will get free. Then I will away like a bird! But I must not stay too long with you, senor, for suspicion it might arouse. I will go."

"Stop a minute! How about the pale-face maiden who is a captive? Can you not aid her to escape with me?"

Pepe fell back, a look of pain falling athwart her face.

"You love her, senor?"

"She is one of my own race and very fair. I have never spoken with her."

"I cannot give you aid in rescuing her. You have friends. With them you can return to her rescue."

"And find these red dogs have flown?"

"Then you must pursue. But I can stay no longer. Adios."

In another moment she was gone.

No need to tell how the anxious hours dragged till night came. The captive was burning with eagerness and atremble with excitement. Would he succeed in escaping? Could he not rescue the Ute's fair captive? He resolved to try.

At dusk Black Brad entered the lodge and stood gloating in evil triumph over the apparently helpless captive.

"Wal," he grinned, "your goose is cooked, fer ole Two Hosses has said you must die. Ther

reds are goin' ter hev some kind of er pow-wow ter-night, w'en they'll pertend ter settle yer fate, but it's already settled. Afore midnight you will be moved inter ther Death Lodge. Ther must make ye feel well. I'll le've ye ter yer thoughts, an' I reckon you'll do some tall thunkin'. Ha! ha! So long!"

Then he left the lodge.

Conrad held his temper, making no reply to the dastard, for he had no care to bandy words with a wretch so depraved.

By midnight he would be moved to the Death Lodge. If he escaped, it must be before that time, for he would be doubly guarded after he crossed the threshold of the fatal Lodge. There could be no escape then.

Would Pepe never come? His blood was alternate currents of lava and ice-water.

Darkness fell and the minutes dragged into hours. He heard a shouting in the Indian village, then came the voices of the red-men lifted to a high pitch as, one after another, they seemed to be delivering orations.

The council of death was taking place.

At length Conrad could wait no longer, and he slipped his hands out of the bonds. That was an easy task. Then he sat up and eagerly tore up the ground till his fingers clasped the knife Pepe had buried. Just as he freed his feet he heard the murmur of voices in front of the lodge, and he knew the dusky maiden was there. She had kept her word.

Conrad knew he must act swiftly, and he lost not a second. With the keen knife he opened a way from the lodge, then he crept cautiously forth.

Near the center of the village blazed a fire by the light of which the warriors were gathered in council. They would not find their captive when they came to look for him.

In the shadows Conrad skulked swiftly along till he reached the lodge where he knew the white maiden was confined. He had resolved to do his best to save her.

Coming up behind the lodge, he was amazed to see a long slit in the covering, an opening that had been made by a sharp knife.

What did it mean?

In an instant he had answered his own question. Pepe had thought he would try to rescue the white girl, and she had opened a way for him.

Casting doubt and hesitation to the winds, he boldly but silently crept into the lodge.

Suddenly he felt his throat seized by a pair of sinewy hands, and a hissing whisper sounded in his ear:

"Make a noise or an outcry and you die instantly!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

"THAR, Chris, lad, thar lays ther Dead Desert with ther settin' sun fallin' on it. Away yon are ther mountains whar ther gal hes bin taken, I reckon. Atween us an' them mountains is miles o' sand, alkili beds, sage-brush an' cacti. Ther desert is strewed with ther bones o' animals as hev died thar, an' 'mong others ther skeleton o' er human critter is sometimes foun'. But ef we ever see ther leetle gal erg'in, ef we keep our pledge ter kerri her back ter her old dad, we mus' cross this yere desert. How d'yer like it?"

"I am ready to follow the red devils and white ruffians to the further extremity of the earth! The girl must be saved! The Dead Desert has no terrors for me."

"That's ther right kind o' talk, lad, an' it's w'at I knowed ye'd say, fer I've seen yer mettle tested. Ef I hain't mistookin, ther w'ite imp as hed er han' in ther kidnappin' wuz ther critter as they calls Black Brad in these parts. Ther cuss is purty well known all over Arizona."

"We have no time to waste, Rube."

"Now, kind o' keep yer shirt on, pard! I tole ye this wuz ther Dead Desert, as they call it. Don't be in too big er hurry ter try it. Even thet hoss o' yourn hain't made o' iron, though I will say it's the most royal critter I ever sot my ole eyes on. It'll be er long time afore we strike water arter we leave this yere timber, an' we hain't had er fair breathin' spell. Both o' us need sleep."

"I do not feel as if I could close my eyes."

"Now, you don't want ter git thet way, lad; you've got too much boss sense. Darned ef it don't look like you wuz stuck on ther leetle gal!"

"It is not that, Rube. I admit I was charmed with her, and her song of the Roving Heart filled me with sweet and tender thoughts, but I scarcely think I fell in love with her."

"Oh, I dunno! Young fellers like you ketch ther disease 'tarnal easy like!"

"But the old wound in my heart is far from healed. Rube, I have not forgotten—Nellie!"

"Oh, bosh, boy! She's married now, an' ye might jest ez well fergit. Don't keep nussin' thet ole 'fair! Thar wuz Nina Robinson, I reckon she 'most broke her pore leetle heart over ye, an' she's 'most probbly watchin' fer you ter come back ter her."

"I never loved her, Rube. Nina was good and beautiful, but I did not love her. If she cared for me otherwise than as a friend, I am sorry."

The bow-legged cowboy shut his lips tightly and shook his head in a grim manner.

"Thar hain't no 'countin' fer ther taste o' er young feller like you," he finally declared. "They don't seem ter go by boss sense, but jest by sheer instinct. Waal, I hain't yer boss, pard. Le's go back inter ther grove an' ketch er snooze. Thar will be er good moon, an' we'll putt in ther las' part o' ther night follerin' ther trail by moonlight."

Together the cowboy pards turned back into the grove, the very one at which the Indians had halted ere starting on the journey across the Dead Desert. Thus far they had trailed the captors of Little Bess. Would they be successful in following the red rovers to their lair?

Their horses were within the grove, and Black Cloud gave a low whinny of pleasure as his eyes rested on his handsome master. Chris paused to caress the noble animal's muzzle and pat it lightly on its glossy neck.

In a short time both the cowboys were sound asleep, Rube resting with the lariat of his horse attached to his wrist, knowing the animal would arouse him at the approach of danger.

It was past midnight when the old fellow awoke and aroused his comrade.

"Come, Chris, lad," he cried; "stir up, pard! It's time we wuz movin'. Ther moon makes it purty nigh like day, an' ther Dead Desert by night is better then it is by day. We'll git plenty o' sun scorchin' on it anyhow."

In a few minutes they rode from the grove and turned their faces toward the mountains which lay beyond the desolate desert. They had taken long draughts of water, filled their canteens and given their horses all they wanted to drink. Before they started to trail down the kidnappers Jim Pike had insisted they should provide themselves with dried meat sufficient for several days, and that he had been able to furnish from his stores.

At first the trail left by the red-skins was so plain they went forward at a gallop, but Old Rube observed the course taken by the savages, well knowing they might not be able to follow the trail clean across the desert.

The cacti and greasewood were reached before they encountered any great trouble in following the trail. When they passed out upon the barren waste of sand, morning was not far away and the trail had grown very indistinct, so they were unable to follow it swiftly.

The sand of the desert seemed never at rest, for the icy gusts of night lifted it in clouds and dashed it stinging into the faces of the trailers. And this moving cloud had sifted into the trail till at length there was not a trace of it left.

"What is to be done now?" asked Chris, with sinking heart.

"Nuthin' but jest push right on," was the reply. "Ther reds knowed ther sand w'd hide ther trail, but I hev taken care ter notiss ther direction they wuz takin', an' ef fortune don't turn ag'in us, we may strike their track over yon. We won't waste no more time tryin' ter stick ter ther trail, but we'll push straight erhead. Mornin' hain't fur off."

Before the light of coming day the stars faded, when the east grew rosy and golden as if painted by a master hand. There were no clouds, and the day-god came riding grandly up into view.

"Thar's glory fer ye, pard!" cried the old cowboy. "It looks fine now, but afore long we'll be wishin' some galoot'd hang a blanket up in front o' thet sun, you bet!"

The heat increased as the sun rose higher, and the cool blasts of the night gave way to the hot gusts of the day. Still the sand was spitted spitefully into their faces. Men and horses were covered with dust.

The day advanced. Once or twice they drank from their canteens, and once the horses' mouths were laved with a dampened sponge. The mountains were nearer, much nearer, but both understood how far away they really were for all that they stood out so plainly against the sky. Sometimes bleaching bones rattled beneath the horses' feet, and the iron-shod hoofs were con-

tinually sounding a monotonous "crunch-crunch" in the sand.

It was more than midway in the forenoon when a cry broke suddenly from the young cowboy's lips:

"There is the Phantom Ship!"

Sure enough; seemingly away out on the desert sands lay the wreck of the old Spanish cruiser—or to be more correct, it *seemed* to lay there. The sun was shimmering brightly all around it on the glistening sand, but the appearance of water was absent.

"Thet's ther critter!" nodded Rube. "Dinged ef it don't look natteral! Almost seems like it wuz really thar! W'at ef it is?"

"Would it not have been found before this by those who cross the desert?"

"Ther don't menny human critters but red-skins cross it, I reckon."

"Well, you do not put any confidence in this illusion anyway."

"Waal, I don't mean ter, but o' course thar may be suthin' in it. Thar hain't no livin' man as knows uvery derved thing in this yere worl'."

"Suppose we ride toward it."

"All right, but only fer a short distance. Ef it takes ter runnin' away an' keepin' jest so fur off, we'll shake it too mighty quick."

But instead of receding when they advanced, the wreck began to fade away before their eyes, and soon it had vanished entirely. Then they once more turned their faces toward the mountains.

It was long past mid-day when the fertile section at the foot of the mountains was reached. Their first search was for water, and by rare fortune they came upon the very spring where the Indians had halted after crossing the desert. There Old Rube discovered signs which filled him with delight.

"We're on ther right track, pard! We'll run ther critters ter their hoel, ef we hev ter turn Injun ter do it! Sech er thing is possible thet we'll hev ter rip ther shoes offen our critters, an' plug ther nail-hoels with clay, ter keep ther red varmints frum knowin' we're hot arter 'em. They'll hev their spies out, an' ther skunks are sharp-eyed as thunder!"

Chris was eager to push on, but Rube's good judgment prevented a rash rush, and they remained by the spring during the rest of the day, and the following night. That gave them time to groom their horses, clean themselves and rest.

Then they took the trail into the mountains.

It is not necessary to portray the difficulties surmounted, the dangers passed and the precautions taken. By rare good fortune they located the Ute village on the second day, and were themselves undiscovered. From the side of a thickly-wooded mountain they could look down into the gorge where lay the Indian encampment. In a natural grotto where bubbled a living fountain they concealed their horses.

"Now, pard," said Old Rube, as he watched the rising smoke from the village, "ther next thing's ter find out ef ther leetle gal is thar."

"And then to rescue her."

"Thet will be ther hardest o' all."

Chris knew that only too well.

By studying the rocky walls, they discovered a place where they fancied they could descend into the gorge by means of a lasso, the greater part of the wall at that point being scalable.

"It'll be ticklish work at night," said Round-up Rube; "but we've got ter try it."

In vain they strained their eyes to catch a glimpse of Little Bess. They saw two or three white men moving about among the red-skins, but not a sign of the maiden they had pledged themselves to rescue.

"I reckon she's thar jest ther same," nodded Rube. "Them w'ite varmints are ther critters as cotched her in ther fu'st place, I take it. I'd like ther sakersfaction o' pullin' on ther ropes thet'll hang ther whelps!"

Night came.

The shadows favored them, and they crept down the mountain-side, leaving their rifles with their horses. They were compelled to use the greatest caution in making the descent, for many times they were where a slip or a misstep would have sent them down to death at the bottom of the gorge. For more than an hour they proceeded in this fashion before they reached the spot where it was necessary to use the lasso. Then, by attaching a stone to the end of the rope and lowering it cautiously, they discovered one lasso was not enough. Two firmly knotted together proved much more than enough.

Making the rope firm to a point of rock, Old Rube stripped off his buckskin blouse and placed it in such a manner that the edge of stone, where

the lasso fell over, would not wear the cord in two. Then he swung down and descended with the agility of a sailor, leaving Chris to follow.

The young cowboy waited till his friend was at the bottom, then he began the descent. He was a born athlete, and rope-climbing had been one of his favorite exercises, so he slid down the line without the least trouble.

"Now," whispered Rube, when they had reached the bottom, "you hed best 'pend on me an' keep in ther back-ground. I hain't no Injun-fighter ter speak of, but I hev bin thar afore this. It's plain ther red skunks are hev'in' some kind o' er pow-wow, fer we kin hear 'em whoopin' her up. See, they hev lighted up er mighty big fire."

"Perhaps they are intending to put their fair captive to torture!" excitedly whispered Chris.

"No danger o' thet," assured Rube. "They never brung her all this ways fer thet purpose. It's suthin' else, you bet. We're probably inside ther guard, but we can't be too cautious. Ef any o' them Injun's dogs scent us, we'll be in er tight fix. Come on."

He led the way, and Chris followed closely. They crept forward with the greatest caution, and succeeded in entering the village without being detected. The braves were all gathered at the council, and by dropping down the canyon wall, they had evaded the guards, if there were any.

Finally they paused behind a lodge, and Rube placed his lips close to the young cowboy's ear, while he whispered:

"Stay here till I return."

In another moment he had glided away.

Chris did not like the arrangement, but he made the best of it, remaining close to the lodge. He was wondering how they were to find Little Bess when a strange sound caught his ear.

It was a low sob!

Eagerly he listened, and he heard it again.

It came from within the lodge!

Chris Comstock's heart gave a great leap. Some one was weeping within the lodge. Who should it be unless a captive?

On his hands and knees he began creeping around the lodge, his knife between his teeth. He soon reached a position where he could see a man lying on the ground in front of the opening.

The weeping now became more apparent, and the man stirred uneasily, muttering a word which revealed the fact that he was a pale-face.

Then he thrust his head in at the opening, growling:

"W'at in blazes you snufflin' 'bout, gal? I want ye ter stop it, fer I'm mighty tender-hearted, an' I don't like ther sound nohow you kin fix it. Shut up!"

Having given this pleasant order, the "tender-hearted" man rolled over and stretched himself on the ground again.

Chris was atremble with anger and longed to leap upon the ruffian and choke the breath from his body. But caution forbade such a move. He must find a way to enter the lodge without the knowledge of the renegade guard.

Carefully he backed away till he was once more behind the maiden's place of confinement. He listened, but could no longer hear the sobbing.

"I must take the chances," thought Cowboy Chris, as his fingers removed the knife from between his teeth. "If she makes an outcry, it will cook my goose."

He seemed to forget Round-up Rube for the time. Pressing the point of the keen knife against the covering which served as the back wall of the lodge, he cut a long straight slit, doing it with all the caution and silence he could command.

He more than half expected to hear an exclamation or an outcry from the girl, but in this he was happily disappointed. Not a sound came from within the prison lodge.

After waiting a moment, he crept slowly in, not daring call to the girl in a whisper. It was dark within the lodge.

When he had fairly passed through the opening, he began feeling about with his hands. Suddenly he touched something soft and warm, and, with a thrill, he felt his own fingers clasped by soft and trembling ones.

He had found Little Bess!

Then he drew her gently toward the opening. If they could escape from the lodge without arousing a suspicion, they might get away easily.

But just as he was about to creep forth, a startling thing occurred. A human head and shoulders were thrust in at the opening, and some one came creeping noiselessly into the lodge.

Who was it?

The moment was fraught with deadly peril!

CHAPTER XIV.

ESCAPE.

WAS it Round-up Rube?

Cowboy Chris asked himself the question, but was unable to answer it. He felt the girl shiver with terror, and knew she understood the peril they were in.

Making a careful calculation, Chris suddenly reached out and grasped the throat of the unknown, at the same time whispering a command for silence.

He did not think the person an Indian, and the moment his fingers gripped the person's throat, he was sure it was not a red-skin.

There was no outcry.

Relaxing his grasp a bit, Chris asked:

"Who are you?"

"Conrad Vincent, a white man," came the faintly-whispered reply. "Who are you?"

Chris did not reply, but he remembered the name, having heard it from Old Blossom's lips. This person was one of the old treasure-hunter's comrades.

With his lips close to Conrad's ear, Chris whispered:

"Get out as you came in. We will follow. A noise will cost us our lives!"

In a flash the young cowboy had seemed to understand the situation. This Vincent, like himself, was making an attempt to rescue the captive of the Utes. He seemed to settle this in his mind in an instant, and trusted everything on his being right. There was but one other course, and that meant for him to stain his hands with blood in the face of almost certain discovery and capture by the reds.

He knew there was no time for hesitation.

Conrad was also aware that every moment was precious, and therefore did not pause to reason out the meaning of the singular situation. Instantly, he began to back from the lodge.

Chris caused Little Bess to follow, and ere he left the lodge he could hear the ruffianly guard snoring on the ground in front of the proper opening.

It was Ugly Ike, and he little dreamed how the coveted captive of his chief was slipping through his fingers.

Soon the two young men and the maiden were together at the back of the lodge. Then Chris led them away, moving toward the bluff adown the face of which dangled the united lassoes.

Fortune seemed to smile on them, for not even an Indian cur ran across their track. They passed in safety from the village and reached the life line.

"Can you climb?" asked Chris of Conrad.

"Like a cat," was the prompt reply.

"Then up you go. I will remain here with the young lady. When you reach the top, shake the line. I will then hitch it securely about the young lady's waist and follow you. Both of us can easily draw her up to the shelf."

Conrad started to demur, but Chris silenced him with a word, telling him that they had no time to lose. Then Vincent began the climb.

It proved a severe tax to his strength and skill, for it requires as much skill as strength to climb a rope, but he reached the top at last and gave the signal, sinking down almost exhausted.

In a short time Chris came struggling upward.

Barely had the young cowboy reached the cliff when there arose an uproar in the Indian village. There were loud yells, as if the warriors had made some amazing discovery, and from the cliff the two could see many figures darting hither and thither in the firelight.

"They have discovered my escape!" cried Conrad. "Quick! We will draw up the young lady!"

Cowboy Chris felt his heart leap into his throat as he suddenly thought of his pard, Round-up Rube. It seemed the old cattleman would surely be discovered in the village, and then his life would pay the forfeit.

Together the two young men began drawing up the lasso with its precious human burden attached. In a few moments the girl was safe on the cliff at their side, but she was in a state of semi-unconsciousness caused by the excitement through which she had passed.

As Conrad bent over Bessie, endeavoring to restore her, Chris crouched by the edge of the cliff eagerly watching the gorge below.

He was looking for Old Rube.

The excitement in the camp continued, and suddenly it was redoubled. It seemed as if every savage had turned to a madman and was trying to split his throat with his cries. The young cowboy thought he understood what it meant.

The Utes had made another discovery and knew their fair captive was gone. If not that,

then it must be the bow-legged cowboy had fallen into their hands.

How the young cowboy longed to see the dark figure of the veteran cattleman come hurrying down the gorge!

Suddenly another sound came from the village. At first Chris could not make out what it was. Rapidly it came nearer, and soon he saw a dark mass sweeping down the gorge, while a thunder of hoofs arose upon the night air.

Horses! The Indian ponies had been stampeded!

The cowboy on the cliff knew it was the work of Round-up Rube. Eagerly he bent forward and scanned the dark mass as it swept along below.

Behind the ponies, clinging to the back of one of them and yelling like a madman was the bow-legged cowboy!

Down the mighty gorge swept the black cloud of horses with the cries of the dare-devil cowboy urging them to greater fear. Behind them came the Indians afoot, yelling in impotent rage, now and then firing an ineffectual shot, which only served, if anything, to frighten the stampeded animals still more.

"It is useless to wait for Rube!" half laughed Cowboy Chris, drawing back to escape detection by the savages.

The three remained on the cliff till the sound of the stampede had quite died out in the distance, but the sounds of impotent fury still came from the Ute village. At length, when the coast seemed clear, they started to make the ascent to the spot where the horses were concealed.

It is not necessary to describe their struggle in climbing the rugged wall. They were finally successful, reaching the grotto before the moon had risen high enough to expose them to the keen eyes that might be watching below.

Bessie was nearly exhausted, but she declared she was ready for anything that would take them beyond the reach of the Indians and Black Brad's outlaws.

A consultation was held, and they finally decided to turn toward the desert, trusting to fortune to get out of the mountains without being captured.

"We may as well do so," said Chris, for every minute we remain here now increases our danger. The red devils will scour the country round about, and they would be pretty sure to investigate this grotto. Round-up Rube will not come back here, for he will expect me to move at once. That is the proper course to pursue."

Chris had taken careful note of the course pursued in entering the mountains, and he believed he could easily find the way out.

It was necessary for one of the horses to bear a double burden, and so Conrad and Bessie rode together, the young man's strong arms doing much to keep the girl secure upon the steed. Chris led the way, and in that manner they pushed on till morning was at hand.

By the rarest fortune they discovered a small cave in which they were able to take refuge during the day. The horses were given a chance to feed before it was fairly light, but were compelled to fast during the entire day, a thing which was made easier by the discovery of a spring of pure water in the cave.

There was a small amount of dried meat left, and of this the three ate sparingly.

At nightfall they moved on again, and before morning the border of the Dead Desert was reached.

CHAPTER XV.

DOGGED ACROSS THE DESERT.

There they rested, giving the horses feed and water.

Little Bess was standing it better than Chris had dared to hope. His greatest fear was that she would give out, for he well understood what a strain it must be upon her.

The young cowboy wondered where Round-up Rube could be. He believed there was no doubt but that the old fellow had escaped, but what had become of him? That was the question that puzzled Chris.

The sun was already showering its heat upon the Dead Desert when they were ready to start on the dreary journey.

"I say, pardner," spoke Conrad, "aren't you afraid we shall be sighted by the reds and pursued as soon as we strike out on that plain?"

"Hardly, laughed Chris. "You seem to forget that Rube Randall stampeded the ponies of our particular enemies. The reds will not attempt to pursue us afoot across the Dead Desert."

"They may have recovered their ponies by this time."

"That shows you are not acquainted with Round-up Rube."

"Their best men will follow till those ponies are recovered."

"Rube will give them a long chase. I reckon that is the very reason why we have not seen anything of him, although I had not thought of it before. He is keeping the red trailers at a hot pace, thus giving us plenty of time to escape. Old Rube knows his biz!"

So, trusting all to Chris Comstock's judgment, they rode out upon the plain in the broad glare of day.

They had ridden about four miles when Chris, who had been gazing back toward the mountains, uttered an exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"By Jove! we are dogged!" he cried.

"I was afraid of it," said Con. "How many are there?"

"I am unable to make out but three. It is probable there were not horses for more."

When they had ridden further, Chris observed:

"Hanged if I believe those are red-skins anyway!"

"Whites?"

"I reckon."

"They are following us?"

"Sure."

"Then they must be Black Brad and his men!" exclaimed Little Bess, in alarm. "I fear them more than the Indians!"

"That is just who they are, I believe!" cried Conrad, after surveying the three figures in pursuit.

"That explains why we are pursued," declared Chris. "Those men do not ride Indian ponies, and it is probable their horses were not with the herd Old Rube stampeded."

"Well, we will make it warm for them if they press us!" gritted Con. "We are both armed, for I have this rifle that belongs to your partner."

"And Rube's rifle is a good one. He will not carry anything but a superior weapon."

It was plain the three outlaws had decided to "press them," for they were overtaking our friends rapidly. Seeing this, Bessie was eager to hurry on, but Chris told her not to be alarmed.

"I will give them a little set-back when they get too near," he said. "They will learn to keep their distance, and we cannot afford to use up a doubly burdened horse by rushing him beneath this scorching sun."

When the outlaws had approached as near as he wished them to, Chris fell back, allowing the others to ride on in advance. Then he stopped his horse and signaled for the outlaws to turn about.

Their answer was a shout of derision.

"Well," muttered Chris, "it is plain I will have to teach you a lesson, and it may be a pretty severe one, for I cannot do fancy shooting at this distance."

Throwing his rifle to his shoulder, cocking it as it rose, he touched the trigger.

There was a little puff of smoke and the clear whip-like crack of a Winchester.

As the smoke blew away, the marksman saw one of the outlaws start and reel in the saddle. The man did not fall, but it was plain he was hard hit.

Uttering a clear, ringing yell, the young cattleman wheeled his magnificent horse and galloped after Conrad and Bessie.

"I marked one of them," he laughed, as he reached the others. "I scarcely believe they will be so anxious about overtaking us after this."

Looking back, it was seen the three men, still mounted, were gathered close together.

"Two of them looking after the wound of the third," said Chris. "I had no desire to kill the fellow outright, but the distance was too great for me to attempt to wing him. I was forced to fire straight at him and let it go at that."

Little Bess was transferred from Old Rube's horse to the back of Black Cloud, although Conrad seemed reluctant to allow the precious charge to leave his steadying arms. Having made this change, they moved forward more rapidly, the noble black steed not seeming to mind the addition to his burden.

For some time the outlaws remained where they had halted after Chris Comstock's shot, but finally they took up the pursuit once more. However, they did not press our friends very closely, plainly having found it did not pay.

"They have settled down to dog us across the desert," said Chris. "They are going to watch for a chance to get in their work."

He was right.

In that manner the passage of the Dead Desert was made. Only once, just after nightfall, did the three Hawks get uncomfortably close to our friends. Chris sent two bullets whistling close to the ruffians' ears, his aim being rendered uncertain by the moonlight, and they drew off again.

"They seem to be stayers," remarked Conrad.

"That is true, but they may stay to their sorrow. If Black Brad ever lays a hand on Miss Bessie again, I will run him to his doom!"

"Oh, he shall not touch her!" assured Con.

"Heaven knows I hope not!" came soberly from the girl's lips.

It was near morning when the Desert was passed and the little grove reached, for by rare fortune they had come directly to the grove that contained the spring.

There they halted.

"Here is feed for the horses, if not for ourselves," said Chris. "But we can stand it as long as we have plenty of water and a show for knocking over game of some kind in the morning. The thing is to keep an eye on Black Brad and his boys. I will look after them, Vincent, while you see to the animals. Try to find some scraps of that dried meat for Miss Bessie. She must keep her strength, for the journey is not yet over, although the worst is past. Don't dare close your eyes, pard. Watch out."

With this warning admonition, the young cowboy slipped away toward the edge of the grove. Reaching it, he was amazed to find the three outlaws had disappeared.

Where had they gone?

He felt sure they had not been given time to reach the grove, yet the moonlight showed him the plain apparently barren and deserted.

"Hanged if I can understand that!" he muttered. "What kind of a trick have they played? I can't—"

He was interrupted by a scream from the center of the grove.

It was Bessie's voice!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE HAWK'S TALONS.

WHEN Cowboy Chris turned back toward the edge of the little grove, Conrad Vincent gathered some bits of wood and lighted a small fire. Barely had he accomplished this, when he was startled by hearing Little Bess utter a scream of terror. He wheeled as she sprung to his side, crying:

"Don't let him touch me! It is Black Brad!"

She was pointing toward a horseman, who, silently as a ghost, had ridden out of the shadows into the little circle of firelight.

Con grasped Round-up Rube's rifle, but he did not use it, for a well-known voice cried:

"Hello, Vincent! Can it be that is you?"

"Monima, as I live!" shouted the young man.

In another moment the two were shaking hands, while Little Bess looked on in amazement and fear, unable to understand what it meant.

In a moment Chris Comstock came bounding to the spot, and he also seemed amazed when his eyes rested on Monima's face.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

Monima bowed.

"This is a friend of mine," explained Conrad, apparently a little puzzled by the strange looks on the faces around him. "Mr. Monima, Mr. Comstock."

The introduction was acknowledged by both parties, but they did not offer to touch hands. Monima had dismounted, and was standing beside his horse.

Little Bess regarded the stranger doubtfully, and for the moment it seemed as if she were forgotten.

With a deep flush of shame at his rudeness, Conrad hastened to introduce her. She bowed slightly, but drew a bit further from Monima and nearer Chris.

He looks so much like Black Brad!" she whispered to the young cowboy, as Conrad and Pardan were speaking together. "I thought him the outlaw at first, and that is why I cried out."

Chris opened his lips to speak, then he closed them again. It would not do to let her know what had happened—at least, it would not do just then. She must have no worry or excitement that could be kept from her.

Undecided just what to do, he stood regarding Pardan Monima for a few moments, then, remembering Black Brad and his men, he left Bess with a quickly-spoken excuse and hurried back to the edge of the grove.

Still the outlaws were not in sight.

"Strange!" he muttered, shaking his head.

"They must have ridden like the wind after we

entered the grove, or they have sunk into the ground. I cannot understand it, and it gives me an uneasy feeling."

For several moments he was silent, then once more he spoke his thoughts aloud.

"What ought I to do about this man who calls himself Monima? That is another puzzle for me. I believe the fellow is a villain, yet he is a friend of Vincent's. Bessie must not dream he shot her father down in a duel. I can say nothing about it in her presence, and I think there is no danger of the man speaking of it. If I say anything about it, I will have to take him aside."

"I believe Vincent is in love with Little Bess, for I have seen it in his eyes. Well, I do not wonder. She is sweet and innocent. Even I have dreamed of her. Possibly I might have learned to love her, but I have held love out of my heart since I have seen those two together, for something tells me they were made for each other, and I want no second disappointment to make me bitter and cynical. If I see she cares nothing for Vincent, then—"

"Well, what then? Love is not a thing that will come at one's bidding. I might not love her after all. She is a dear little creature for whose sake I would make any sacrifice, but that is no reason why I should desire to make her my wife. *My wife!* Ha! ha! ha! I will not marry for years—if ever. I am beginning to taste the sweets of a roving life, and I shall not settle down for years to come."

Once more carefully surveying the open plain and detecting no sign of the outlaws, he turned back into the grove. He found the trio gathered around the little fire.

"You had better keep your eyes open for the Border Hawk," cautioned Chris. "The three outlaws have disappeared, and I can see nothing of them."

Instantly Monima spoke up:

"I saw them, for I saw you when you entered the grove. The moment you were within the grove, the three pursuers turned to the right and rode as if Satan himself were after them. I did not watch to see what became of them."

"They must have hidden in a fissure in the plain," said Chris; "although I cannot understand why they did so."

"By getting out of your sight they can make movements of which you know nothing. Probably they mean to deceive you in some way."

"That must be it, but they will not succeed if we all keep our eyes open. I am going back to the edge of the grove, and you must not relax your vigilance for a moment. If by any chance Black Brad should get the best of us now, I should be ready to die of shame and rage."

Once more the young cowboy returned to his watch.

Pardan and Conrad were discussing how they came to be separated. Bessie reclined on a blanket spread beside the fire, but there was a fascination that caused her to almost constantly watch Pardan Monima's face. Surely the man was almost an exact counterpart of Black Brad.

Monima noticed how closely he was observed, and he stirred uneasily.

Having come to an understanding with his friend, Conrad looked after the horses, Monima assisting him in this. The young man was delighted to find a small amount of dried meat, which was forced on Little Bess, although she protested.

"You must eat it, Bessie," said Conrad, softly. "Remember, you must keep your strength as much for our sakes as for your own."

"But what will you eat?"

"We shall probably be able to kill some game with the coming of day, for we are now in a fertile section. The desert is passed, and here game abounds."

After a time he succeeded in inducing her to eat.

It now came Pardan Monima's turn to secretly watch the girl. She seemed to fascinate him. At length he approached her, not appearing to notice how she shrunk from him. With some difficulty he succeeded in drawing her into conversation, although he was obliged to do the greater part of the talking. Gradually he led her to speak of her father, and then he mentioned her mother. At this, a shadow crossed her face.

"My mother is dead," she replied.

"Do you remember her?"

"No; I was only a little more than two years of age when she died. I can remember nothing of her."

"Does your father often speak of her?"

"Oh, no!"

"That is strange."

"Strange?" with a peculiar look. "I do not

understand how it is strange. She is dead, it makes him sad to speak of her—it makes a dark cloud come over his face. At times I used to ask him to tell me of her, but he would always put me off. I did not know why. Once he asked me to speak of her no more, and seeing how it distressed him, I was ever after careful to give him no more pain in that way. Poor papa!"

She stopped suddenly, amazed at herself for having spoken so much; but he still led her on.

"Have you often visited your mother's grave?"

"No," she replied, slowly, "never."

"Never? How is that?"

"I know not where it is. Sometimes papa talked strangely of it; sometimes he said her grave was in his heart. I could not understand him. He never told me where she was buried."

After talking with the girl a few seconds longer, Monima arose and beckoned Conrad aside. When they were beyond easy ear-shot of the girl, the bearded man said:

"Vincent, I have something to tell you—something that concerns that girl back there. The very night we were separated I met her father."

"Well?"

"His name is Pike, and Old Blossom is his brother. Blossom was with him, and also were this young cowboy and his sharp-eyed companion. Pike took me for some one else—a man who had lured his wife from him. That child yonder thinks her mother is dead. Well, she may be, but, if so, the girl's father knows nothing about it. The heartless woman not only deserted her husband but abandoned her child to fly with the object of her unlawful love. That man must have looked like me, for Pike thought I was the man. I thought *him* insane then, but since talking with the girl, I have changed my mind. Anyway, he forced me into a duel."

"A duel?"

"Yes. We stood face to face, armed with our revolvers. I knew he meant to have my life, and I was not ready to die, for I, too, have a mission I have sworn to perform. I felt it was his life or mine, and being forced into the affair, believed it right to defend myself. Therefore I—"

"Killed him?"

"Perhaps so. At least, I dropped him in his tracks. He was so excited he failed to touch me with his shot; but when I saw him fall, I knew I must resort to strategy if I escaped. Therefore, I fell also, and when they were examining his injury, I arose, sprung on my horse and dashed away."

Conrad drew back from Monima, uttering an exclamation of horror.

"If you have killed her father," he cried—"if you have—"

But words failed him.

During these moments they had not once glanced toward Little Bess.

Suddenly they were startled by hearing her utter a shrill cry. Both men whirled to see her in the arms of a strong man who was bounding toward Pardan Monima's horse. Before they could make a move, he reached the animal, tore the picket pin from the ground, flung the girl across its back, then vaulted upon the creature.

With a wild yell of exultation, Black Brad struck his spurs into the horse's sides and plunged toward the southern border of the grove, carrying a semi-unconscious captive with him.

The dove had fallen into the talons of the Hawk once more!

CHAPTER XVII.

RUN DOWN.

In some manner the outlaw had crept into the grove without being seen, and when Monima called Conrad aside it gave Black Brad the very opportunity he had been looking for. With the daring of a desperate man, he sprung upon the girl and carried her to the horse.

As the Border Hawk leaped upon the horse's back, Pardan Monima threw up his right hand holding a revolver. Conrad saw the move and knew the treasure-hunter meant to fire.

"Stop!" he screamed. "You may hit the girl!"

He thrust Pardan's hand upward just as the weapon exploded, and the bullet went whistling high over Black Brad's head.

With another yell of defiance, the outlaw disappeared with his captive.

The two men sprung toward the horses, but before they could reach them, Chris Comstock was there. The young cowboy asked no questions. A glance around told him what had hap-

pened. He only paused to fling his handsome saddle on Black Cloud's back, strap it there with one swift motion, insert the bit, secure another buckle, and then—

Like a cyclone the black horse and its rider swept after the kidnapper.

The rosy light of dawn was in the East; a sweet breath came from the flower-prairie; another perfect day was about to be born.

Headed toward the south, Brad Hawk dashed out upon the plain, his strong hands holding fast to his fair captive. His bearded lips parted to give vent to an evil laugh of triumph.

"Ha! ha!" he cried. "I fooled them well! They knew not the *arroyo* was there for us to hide in; they knew not that in it I could creep almost to the grove without being detected. If they pursue me, Ike and Bob will make it hot for them. Oh, they need not butt against Brad Hawk! He is too much for them!"

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Cowboy Chris come bursting from the grove, mounted on the gallant black. Man and horse seemed as one, and a fine picture they made as they dashed out upon the plain.

"Now ther boys must git in ther work. Thet is ther critter thet pinked Bob in ther shoulder. He's ther wu'st one of ther lot, an' thet hoss—Great Scott! I tuck ther wrong critter. I thought I had thet hoss!"

Monima's horse was nearly the same color as that belonging to the young cowboy, and the outlaw had been deceived in the shadow of the trees.

For a moment the man had dropped the vernacular of the border, speaking as if he were a person of some education, but the rough language had become so fixed upon him that he again resorted to its use when excited.

Bitterly Black Brad blamed the luck for his error.

"On thet horse I c'u'd hev 'scaped!" he gritted. "I c'u'd hev done it even though ther critter had bore er double burden. Now, I must 'pend on ther boys. Whar kin they be?"

As if in answer to his question, two men and three horses seemed to rise up out of the plain ahead of him. In truth, they rode up from a gully that led down into a narrow ditch-like fissure—an *arroyo*.

The two were Bad-eye Bob and Ugly Ike. They uttered yells of delight as they saw their chief had been successful, spurring to join him when he swerved to the left to avoid the fissure in the plain.

"Hooray, boss!" yelled Ike, as the two reached their chief. "Gimme ther gal an' let me fasten her ter this yar hoss."

Black Brad shook his head.

"No time fer thet," he asserted. "Let me hev my critter, an' I'll shift ter giv this hoss er rest w'en I'm too hard pressed. You two'll hev ter knock thet cuss out of ther saddle ef ye kin. I made er mistook in hosses, though I dunno whar this annymill kem frum. Reckon it's er good one, but it hain't no match fer thet one he rides."

With his own horse as a led-animal, the outlaw chief forged ahead, his two satellites falling back a little.

By this time the sun was creeping up into view.

Silently Cowboy Chris was pressing after the captor of Little Bess, determination written on his face.

Still further back came another horse bearing a double burden. The animal belonged to Conrad Vincent, who, with Pardan Monima, was also in pursuit.

When they had fallen back somewhat, Ugly Ike wheeled in the saddle and sent a bullet singing back at the young cowboy on the black steed, but Chris did not seem to notice it in the least.

"Wish you c'u'd pop ther young rip over, pard!" growled Bad-eye, his face showing how the rapid pace was filling him with pain from his wounded shoulder.

"I reckon I'll hev ter knock him out of ther saddle."

"Ef you don't, he'll be apt ter knock us out. He kin shoot, you bet!"

Again and again Ugly Ike fired at the determined Cowboy Centaur, till at last Chris was seen making motions as if he meant to return the shots.

"Double dern him!" snarled Ike. "I don't seem able ter tetch ther critter a tall!"

"But you bet he'll tetch us!" cried Bob. "Spur up! spur up! I don't want ter get another dost!"

By this time Black Brad had forged quite a distance ahead. The two rascals tried to overtake him, but the chief had found a way to

transfer himself and his burden from Monima's horse to his own, and they were unable to gain a foot.

All the while Cowboy Chris was steadily and surely overtaking them, the noble black steed holding a steady pace that would bring its master to success in time.

"Try him erg'in, Ike!" growled Bob, his face growing white. "You've got ter kill ther critter!"

Ugly Ike wheeled to the left and lifted his rifle; but before he could fire, Chris Comstock's weapon spoke, the cowboy not even pausing to lift it to his shoulder.

To a certain extent it was a chance shot, as the marksman was mounted on a galloping horse, but the bullet was billeted.

With a shrill scream of pain, Ike's horse suddenly shot forward with almost redoubled speed. The ruffian knew what that meant, and his face paled, while he reined the animal still more to the left, muttering:

"Ther ole hoss hes got it fer keeps! I've got ter git out of ther track, ur be run down by ther persession. It seems like ther devil protects thet cow-puncher!"

Seeing Ike reining to the left, Bad-eye Bob followed the example, and in a short time the two were quite out of the race.

Ike's horse did not go far before its pace slackened, and it began to stagger. Knowing what was coming, the ruffian drew rein and sprung to the ground.

None too soon.

In another moment the horse fell heavily on its side, in a dying condition.

By this time Cowboy Chris had swept past, and was pressing hard after the chief of the kidnappers.

Hearing a cry away to the right, Chris looked in that direction, and saw a lone horseman striking as if to cut Black Brad off from a small knot of timber, toward which he seemed to be heading.

"It is Rube!" exclaimed the young Centaur, in delight.

He was right. The bow-legged cowboy was still in harness, and his presence showed he had succeeded in eluding the red-skin trailers.

Black Brad also heard the cry, and saw the horseman riding as if to cut him off.

"Curse ther luck!" he gritted. "I must reach ther timber ahead of 'em both! Thar I kin drop 'em with er couple of shots—an' I'll do it!"

Savagely he spurred onward, and with a thrill of joy he saw he would be successful in cutting across ahead of Round-up Rube. But a backward glance showed him Cowboy Chris was gaining with every stride of the gallant black.

"He's ther wust devil of ther two!" muttered the outlaw. "I'd guv suthin' ter putt er bullet through his heart, an' git possession of thet hoss!"

Nearer and nearer he drew to the timber, but with every moment the untiring pursuer was shortening the distance between them. As he looked over his shoulder, the Border Hawk almost fancied he could see the deadly gleam in Chris Comstock's eyes. Once he was tempted to draw rein and make battle on the open plain, using the horses and the girl as protection from his enemies' bullets while he shot them down; but, seeing he could reach the timber, he still pressed on.

Before the grove was reached he could hear the thud-thud of the cowboy's horse, and knew Chris was pressing him hard. He looked to his revolvers, and prepared to use them the instant he left the saddle.

The timber was reached!

At that very instant a figure leaped out before the outlaw, and his horse was caught by the bit, a sinewy hand setting the animal fairly back on its haunches, while a voice cried:

"Wobble-j'inted Maria! Ham-fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah! Yung-hup, critter, an' surrender thet gal!"

Old Blossom was on hand.

Another form appeared, a rifle was pointed at Black Brad's head, and the voice of Roly Poly Hans was heard.

"Dot vas peesness, I pets you! Uf you don'd skurrender, I plow uf you der roof uf your head off! Dis guns vas loated mit dynermite, and you vill die ner mighty shord sbace uf time uf he goes off und hits you. Yaw, dose vas some facts!"

With a savage roar, the Border Hawk threw up his hand and fired the revolver he held. But Old Blossom had seen the move and dodged in time.

In another instant Cowboy Chris thundered to the spot, Black Brad was torn from his saddle and his captive snatched from his arms.

Believing it meant life or death, the outlaw made a fierce struggle. But he was no match for the infuriated young cattleman, and Chris hurled the desperate wretch to the ground with such violence that Hawk was stunned.

"Give me the cords and I will make him fast," said Chris.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY.

OLD Jim Pike's wound had not proved as dangerous as it was at first supposed it would, and so on the second day after the departure of the two cowboys he had insisted on moving northward on the trail. So the mules were harnessed into the army wagon, and the Dutch lad took the reins, Old Jim reclining on a bed of blankets within the wagon. The tall Nomad led the way, mounted on the Indian Pony Round-up Rube had captured for him.

In that manner they had traveled as far north as the flower-prairie, and they had halted in the very grove toward which Black Brad had turned in that desperate dash across the plain.

This explains the opportune appearance of Old Blossom and Roly Poly Hans.

Round-up Rube came dashing up a few moments after the Border Hawk had been made secure.

"Hooraw, Chris, lad!" shouted the old fellow, as he leaped from the saddleless back of the little Indian pony and clasped his pard in his arms. "It's you shore enough! I wuzn't jest sart'in you'd got away from the red skunks tell I saw ye chasin' this critter 'crost ther prairie. I hed ter stampede ther critters in order ter git out, an' I 'low it's er mighty good thing I did. An' ye got off with ther gal, ur how wuz it?"

With a few hasty words, the young cowboy explained.

"Waal, w'en we're done with this varmint," and Rube contemptuously touched the outlaw's body with his foot, "I don't reckon he'll steal any more gals."

By this time Little Bess was on her feet and eager to go to her father.

The fat Dutch boy was dancing with delight.

"Oh, dis vas some sighds vor sore eyes!" he laughed. "Here vas Miss Pessie all righd side up mit some care! I feels shoost like I wants to plow off steam like some steam injines! If some von don'd caught holt uf me, I runs meinself away mit und do some damages vor which I don'd pe responsible."

"Take me to papa!" cried Bessie.

Hans led the way, and the girl followed, leaning on Chris Comstock's arm.

Old Jim had heard the sounds and was coming to meet them, for all of his wound.

"Old man," said Chris, "we have brought back your child, as we promised."

Then father and daughter were clasped in each other's arms, the parent quite forgetting his injury.

It was an affecting meeting.

Old Blossom and Round-up Rube came bearing the helpless outlaw into camp. As they placed the wretch upon the ground, Jim Pike caught sight of his face and uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"Hybal Harper!" he cried. "Kin it be?"

In another moment he was at the outlaw's side, gazing eagerly into his face.

"You devil!" grated the old man. "You—you are Hybal Harper! I know ye!"

"Thet's whar ye makes er mighty big mistake," coolly asserted the desperado. "I am not Hybal Harper!"

"You lie! I know yer face! Thar wuz another as I thought wuz you, but now I see my mistake. I tried ter kill him, but he spotted me hyer. Ef I hed shot him, I'd bin ther murderer of an innercent man. Now I hev ther right one!"

"But I tell ye I am not Hybal Harper."

"You can't fool me," and the old man glanced around to see Chris earnestly talking with Bessie. "You may as well tell ther truth. You are ther critter as lured my wife from me—as induced her ter desert her child. Thet gal thar is ther child. You are ther skunk."

Brad Hawk smiled sneeringly.

"You don't deny it!" and Old Jim lowered his voice. "I know Jen wuz too young fer me, an' she wuz purty, but she wuz foolish. She needn't hev merried me in ther fu'st place, but arter she hed, she oughter stayed by me an' her child. But you, snake thet ye wuz! you lured her frum me, an' thet arter I hed saved yer life! Oh, you dastard! Whar is she now?"

"Dead."

"You killed her?"

"No; she died of a fever."

"Now you confess you are Royal Harper!"

"You are mistaken. I still deny thet!"

"But you acknowledge you lured my wife away?"

"Yep."

"Then you are Harper!"

"No, I am not. I acknowledge I wuz known ter you as Hybal Harper, but thet is ther name of ernother man, my most deadly foe. It wuz er fancy of mine ter take ther name, fer we looked er heap erlike."

"Whar is this man now?"

"I dunno. I hev not seen him fer y'ars."

"Waal, I hev! I saw him seven nights ergo, an' I thought he wuz you. Now I am satisfied thet wuz ther man. I forced him inter a nuel, an' he kem nigh endin' my life."

This seemed to fill the outlaw with amazement.

"Then he must be again on my trail!" Hawk exclaimed. "Great heavens! I don't want ter face Hybal Harper!"

"That is exactly what you will have to do!" declared a stern voice, and Pardan Monima appeared, followed by Conrad Vincent, who was leading a sweat-covered horse. "I have found you at last, you inhuman villain!"

Then it was seen how much the two men resembled each other in face and form.

Old Jim started up, crying:

"This man is mine—mine!"

"Old man," came colaly from Monima, "I had a claim on him before you ever saw him. I have trailed him for years. He is mine! All the powers of earth cannot keep me from claiming his life now. When I have put a bullet through his black heart, as I will do, then I will come to you and tell you his crime against me—a crime no law can adjust—a crime my own hand must avenge."

"Wobble-j'inted Maria!" spluttered Old Blossom. "W'u'd ye murder ther cuss in cold blood?"

"No; he shall have an equal chance with me. We will fight with revolvers. I want no witnesses present, for I have some words to speak to him before he dies that other ears must not hear. Unbind his feet."

Old Jim protested, but he felt Bessie's soft arms around his neck, and her voice coaxed him to come away. Old Blossom also urged him to let the two men settle the affair, and he finally consented.

"But ef he don't kill ye," he hissed, bending over the outlaw, "I'll foller ye tell I see ye dead at my feet!"

With that he allowed them to lead him away.

Arrangements were soon made for the meeting between the outlaw and Monima. They were to walk away to the edge of the grove, where Monima declared he would give the other a revolver and they would fight on equal footing. Hawk protested, but his words were not listened to at all.

Everything was arranged, and the friends watched the two deadly foes as they walked away together, Hawk's hands still being bound behind him. When the two had disappeared, the little party sat down to listen and wait.

They did not have to wait long.

The sharp crack of two revolvers sounded through the grove.

Then came a dead silence.

After waiting a sufficient length of time for the survivors to return, and hearing no sound, Chris, Rube and Old Blossom hurried to the spot where the duel had taken place.

They found both men lying dead on the ground, revolvers clasped in their right hands!

"Whatever Black Brad's crime against Hybal Harper was," said Chris, "it will forever remain an unsolved mystery to us."

After looking searchingly into the face of first one then the other, Old Blossom soberly declared:

"I believe they wuz brothers!"

The entire party turned their faces southward, and they were not molested on their journey from the "Land of the Phantom Ship."

As for the strange mirage of the Arizona desert, they decided it was nothing but an illusion, however unexplainable its repeated appearances might be, and it was folly to search for the original wreck. The mirage was only seen in a section thousands of feet above sea-level, and the theory that such a section was a great inland sea in the days of the Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, was extremely preposterous—absolutely impossible.

Neither Bad-eye Bob nor Ugly Ike were seen after the death of their chief, although a sharp outlook for the two rascals was maintained.

The night camps were made merry by music, song and story-telling. Every one seemed hap-

py, and Old Jim grew better rapidly. Old Blossom and Roly Poly Hans were full of odd sayings, the Dutch lad being a great deal sharper than he looked.

Conrad and Bessie were much together, and every day that passed found the young man falling deeper and deeper in love with the charming girl.

"I shoost dinks I vill keeb mein vedder eyes on dot couples," muttered Hans. "Maype dere vas some susbisions uf mattermonies in der air. Yaw, I pelieve dot."

One day he came rushing up to Chris and Old Blossom, saying excitedly:

"Shoost you beoples come mit me, unds I vill show you some sight as ish goot your eyes vor. Valk along kindt uf susbiciously like you vas stebbing mit der eggs on."

He conducted them to a certain point where they could see Conrad and Bessie sitting on a bowlder. The young man had his arm around her waist and he was talking to her very earnestly, while her head was bowed, her cheeks flushed and one little foot tapping the ground nervously.

"Vat you dink uf dot?" whispered Hans, his eyes twinkling with a merry light. "I pets you dot veller vish his arm vas apoud den yards long, und den he twists it aroundt dot leedle vaist more as sigsdy-nine dimes. Don'd dot would pe a bicnie?"

"Ham-fat thet sizzled ther sassage o' ole Noah!" came cautiously from Old Blossom's lips. "That kind o' makes me feel same as w'en I wus er young feller an' uster shine up ter ther gals. Yes, it jest duz!"

"Come away," urged Chris, somewhat sadly. "Come away and leave them together. They are happy."

THE END.

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